GILBERT ADAIR

THE HOLY INNOCENTS

MINERVA

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Gilbert Adair is the author of two works of criticism, *Hollywood's Vietnam*, which analysed the American cinema's treatment of the Vietnam War, and *Myths & Memories*, a collection of essays on British culture; and of two sequels to classics of children's literature, *Alice Through the Needle's Eye* and *Peter Pan and the Only Children*.

Based for much of his adult life in Paris, where he launched his career as a film critic and scripted *The Territory*, a 'philosophical exploitation movie' by the Chilean director Raul Ruiz, he currently commutes between that city and London.

Other books by Gilbert Adair:

Hollywood's Vietnam
Alice Through the Needle's Eye
Myths & Memories
Peter Pan and the Only Children

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A Romance

GILBERT ADAIR

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THE HOLY INNOCENTS

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L'imagination au pouvoir
(Graffito)

FIRST PART

Paris. February, 1968

THE CINÉMATHÈQUE FRANÇAISE is situated in the XVIth Arrondissement between the avenue Albert-de-Mun and the Trocadéro esplanade. The Mussolinian monumentality of the Palais de Chaillot in which it is housed so impresses the cinephile who visits it for the first time that he congratulates himself on living in a country that accords such prestige to what is elsewhere the least respected of the arts. Hence his disappointment when he discovers, on closer inspection, that the Cinémathèque itself forms only a modest part of the whole edifice that one reaches, almost furtively, by a basement entrance tucked away to one side.

This may be arrived at either from the place du Trocadéro, in which case one makes one's approach across the esplanade, with its idlers, its lovers, its guitarists, its roller-skaters, its black souvenir peddlers, its tartan-frocked little girls accompanied by their English or German nannies and its illuminated fountains that will sometimes play on unseen into the night like jugglers without an audience. Or else along a shaded path running parallel to the avenue Albert-de-Mun, in which case one enters a kind of Japanese garden: through this garden's floodlit shrubs can be glimpsed the wrought iron Mount Fuji of the Eiffel Tower.

Whichever the approach, one ends by taking a flight of stairs down to the Cinémathèque's foyer, whose faintly intimidating austerity is relieved by the kinetoscopes, praxinoscopes, mechanical peepshows, shadowboxes, magic lanterns and other naïve and charming relics of the cinema's prehistory that are its sole décor.

Three times an evening, at six-thirty, eight-thirty and ten-thirty, the garden is invaded by cinephiles.

But the true fanatics, the *rats de la Cinémathèque*, those who arrive for the six-thirty performance and rarely leave before midnight, prefer not to fraternise with less obsessive visitors for whom Chaillot means only an inexpensive night out.

They regard them as dilettantes. They despise them in the way fish must despise swimmers.

For cinephilia, as it is practised here, is a secret society, a cabal, a

Freemasonry. So the three front rows of the stalls are the exclusive province of the *rats*, whose names ought to have been inscribed on their seats just as the names of Hollywood directors were stencilled on the backs of their folding canvas chairs, often with the *Mr Ford* or *Mr Capra* slightly, though never crucially, obscured by the designee's shoulder and upper arm as he turned his smiling, suntanned gaze to the photographer's camera.

What else are these *rats*, these fanatics, but denizens of the night, veritable vampire bats, wrapping themselves in the cloak of their own shadow?

If they sit so close to the screen, it is not simply in order to commune with the film as Ludwig II of Bavaria watched *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser* from the eminence of a *loge* in an otherwise empty opera house, but also because they cannot bear not to receive its images *first*, when they are brand new, still wet, before they have had to clear the hurdles of each succeeding row, before they have been relayed back from row to row, from spectator to spectator, until, worn out, faded, defiled, second-hand, reduced to the pathetic dimensions of a postage stamp and ignored by the double-backed lovemakers in the very last row of all, they return with relief to their source, the projectionist's cabin.

Besides which, the screen really is a screen. It screens them from the world just as a husband at the breakfast table will erect the barrier of a morning newspaper between himself and his unkempt wife.

'Have you seen the King?'

That evening it was spring in the garden of the Cinémathèque. Spring, with its tufts of crocuses and early violets bursting forth from nowhere like a conjuror's bouquets of tissue-paper flowers.

It was twenty past six. Its two sinuously incurving enamelled iron stems made the Métro entrance look like the portals to an art nouveau Hell. Three adolescents emerged from it on to the place du Trocadéro and turned towards the path running alongside the avenue Albert-de-Mun. The question was posed by the tallest of the three. He was muscular and lean but walked with a lopsided stoop of the shoulders that appeared quite inconsistent with his physique.

Beneath his clothes one imagined shoulder-blades of a shark's fin fineness, delicately chiselled ankle bones: or rather, Mercury's twinned pairs of wings.

And these jumble sale clothes – a patched-up corduroy jacket,

corduroy jeans of a mismatching colour, their creases tapering off into baggy nothingness below the knees, and leather sandals sprouting hairy woollen navy blue socks around the straps – he wore with the *genius* that Stendhal somewhere attributes to a lady stepping out of her carriage. His name was Guillaume. He was seventeen.

His sister Danielle was an hour and a quarter his junior. She was wearing a cloche hat and a soft white fox boa which every five minutes she would sling over her shoulder as negligently as though it were a prizefighter's towel.

The rest of her clothing was not of the nineteen-twenties. It none the less needed no more than that hat and that fur for her to appear as one of the twenties' Muses. But she was as far from the sort of mutton-headed miss for whom such accessories would represent a fashion as are two athletes racing side by side, one of whom has lapped the other. Not since her childhood had she worn anything new. More precisely, she had never grown out of a childish infatuation with tricking herself out in her grandmother's faded gowns. Rather, she grew into the gowns and made them hers.

The mutton-headed miss would stare at her and wonder how she did it. The secret was: *she didn't do it with mirrors*. Danielle would say haughtily, 'It is vulgar to look at yourself in a mirror all the time. A mirror is for looking at others in.' Her vanity, for she was naturally vain, remained of an internal order.

It was not to his sister but to the young man at her side that Guillaume's question had been addressed. Though, at nineteen, Matthew was the oldest in age, he was the youngest in appearance. He was of a featherweight frailness of build and had never shaved in his life. In his crisp-creased blue jeans, tight 'skinny' pullover and white sneakers, he seemed to walk on the very tips of his toes without actually tiptoeing.

He had a habit of flicking the end of his nose with his squat little index finger, each of his fingernails having been bitten or clipped to the quick.

There is a story of a faun that comes to a mountain pool but never succeeds in drinking any water because it has to turn aside, again and again, to reassure itself that no hostile presence lurks nearby. In the end it dies of thirst. Matthew might have been that faun. Even in repose his eyes would glance sideways, warily.

Matthew was a West Coast American, of Italian origin, from a happy San Diego family he had never left before.

In Paris, where he was studying film, he felt utterly gauche,

wrong, 'stuck on' like a Victorian figure in a Surrealist collage. His friendship with Guillaume and Danielle, a friendship that had matured in the white shadow of the Cinémathèque's screen, he judged as a privilege of which he was patently unworthy and he lived in the fear that they would one day arrive at more or less the same conclusion.

He was also terrified that he had not properly read the small print of their relationship. He forgot that friendship is a contract in which there can be no small print. So what he felt for them must be a little different.

A lonely man thinks of nothing but friendship, as a repressed man thinks of nothing but flesh. If Matthew had been granted a wish by a genie or a guardian angel, he would have requested a machine, one yet to be invented, alas, that enables its owner by pressing a button to ascertain where each of his friends is at a given moment, what he is doing and with whom. He belonged to the race who loiter underneath a loved one's window late at night and attempt to decipher the shadows they see flitting across the Venetian blind.

The loved one. Were Danielle and Guillaume his loved ones? His was a sort of half-love, as one says 'half-light', and in the twilight of his half-love the distinction between the sexes became vague and fuzzy. Yet it was not entirely eradicated.

Back in San Diego, before he came to Paris, his best friend had been a footballer, whose symmetrical features were marred by a broken nose. This best friend invited Matthew to spend the night at his home. His room was in a state of undress. The bed was littered with dirty teeshirts and underpants. A Bob Dylan poster and a college football team pennant were pinned on the walls. A stack of board games were piled up in a corner. From the bottom drawer of a chest-of-drawers he took out a large buff envelope, whose contents he spread over the carpet: creamy-textured photographs clipped out of fashion and sporting magazines and depicting young men, most of them in profile, in various stages of *déshabillé*. Matthew, confused, believed his friend to be making a confession and that another was now expected of him. So he admitted what he had not realised about himself until that precise instant: that he too was roused by male beauty, by naked boys with nipples like stars.

The best friend was revolted by this unsolicited disclosure. His parents were offering him a plastic surgery operation as an eighteenth-birthday present. What Matthew had mistaken for erotica was in reality an anthology of sample noses. His heart

pounding, he sneaked back to his own house in the middle of the night.

He determined never again to be caught in that trap. Luckily, the door of the closet he had momentarily stepped out of proved to be a revolving one. Loath to reveal his own secret, the friend did not breathe a word of the indiscretion.

Matthew began to masturbate: once and sometimes twice a day. To provoke the crisis he would conjure up images of leggy youths. But just as the dam was about to burst he would force himself to think of girls instead. This abrupt volte-face grew into a habit. Like a child to whom a fairy tale is read, his solitary orgasms would not tolerate the slightest deviation from the prearranged scenario and ignominiously fizzled out if by mischance he omitted the climactic twist.

There is fire and fire: the fire that burns and the fire that gives warmth, the fire that sets a forest aflame and the fire that puts Mallarmé's cat to sleep. So it is with sexual desire. To make love regularly to the same partner is a form of masturbation. The member that once seemed the equal of the wonders of the world – the Lighthouse of Alexandria coupled with the Hanging Gardens of Babylon – eventually becomes as familiar as one's own, as worn and comfortable as an old slipper. But the reverse is also true. Matthew and himself soon ceased to excite each other's desire.

To revive that desire, to reanimate the spark of transgression he had lost, he made a system out of the gaffe that had caused his heart to pound. Like a good little Catholic, he went every week to confess in the English church on the avenue Hoche.

Confession was his vice. It inflamed him more to plead guilty to his petty squalors than to practise them. The fetid dankness of the confessional reminded him of a *Paris Match* photo-reportage he had once seen on prostitutes' cubicles in Rio or Valparaiso; it nearly always gave him an erection. As for the necessary friction, that was generated by the delicious discomfiture he felt at having to catalogue the number of times he had 'touched himself'.

For it is easier to confess to murder than to masturbation. A murderer is guaranteed a respectful hearing. He makes the priest's day.

Can a writer slip a story into his book even if that story is superfluous to it? Yes, if the story brings out a character. Now, it is important to

bring out the fact that Matthew's half-love was no mere phrase but cast its own spell, possessed its own splendours and miseries.

Before our book begins, he often used to see a fellow student named Dominique. She was lively and petite, an adjective for which there is no equivalent in French. Dominique 'had an understanding' with a certain Eric, the sole beneficiary of a fabulous soft-drink fortune. They made love practically every night, but otherwise he bored her; to his credit, however, he did not make it his business to know how she occupied the hours of his absence. She was allowed to do what she pleased and with whom she pleased on condition that she slept with nobody but him. Theirs was a *modus vivendi* like any other.

Matthew, with whom her friendship was therefore platonic, she found 'different'. In short, he amused her. And one afternoon, while they sat together in the Luxembourg Garden watching children float model sail-boats across the pond, he amused her so much that her helpless laughter brought on an extravagant fit of hiccoughs. Neither face-pulling nor smacks on the back could rid her of these hiccoughs, from which she was still suffering when they took their leave of each other at the foot of a Montparnasse skyscraper silhouetted in the dusk like the gaudy keyboard of an accordion. She was to dine that evening in its overpriced 'panoramic' restaurant, an idea typical of Eric.

Feeling lightheaded, Matthew strolled back to his room, a fifth-floor dungeon in a sordid hotel on one of the narrow side streets radiating from the Sorbonne. It was a hot July evening. So he opened the window, took off his clothes, stretched out on the bed and proceeded to scribble an affectionate letter to his parents.

But from the tiny, cramped courtyard which his window faced there rose up unmistakable sounds of lovemaking. They grew louder and louder. The woman's breath came in briefer and briefer spasms. Matthew got up and walked over to the window. As he was on the point of shutting it, the woman in an erotic frenzy started to hiccough. He paled. He slammed the window. He had just discovered a stain on one of his brightest memories.

To return to the question: were Danielle and Guillaume Matthew's loved ones? In truth, what he had fallen in love with was a facet shared by both of them equally, something identical in them, even if as twins they were not identical, a sibling likeness, untroubled by dispositions of gender, that would dart first to one face, then to the

other, depending on an expression or a trick of the light or the angle at which a head was cocked.

Matthew was in love, then, with the single person Guillaume and Danielle would have been had they not been born twins.

Naturally, he never spoke to them of the avenue Hoche. It was his only secret from them. He would have died before confessing that he went to confession.

'Have you seen the King?'

'Yes . . . No . . . I don't know.'

'Well, which is it?'

'Yes, I think I have. But, as I recall, it's nothing special. Anyway, not a patch on the Borzage.'

What Guillaume meant by 'the King' was *Seventh Heaven*, a sentimental melodrama made in the thirties by a Hollywood film director named Henry King. The same story had been filmed once before by another director, Frank Borzage, but it was King's version they were to see at six-thirty. During the month of March the Cinémathèque was programming a complete retrospective of King's work.

But why should they wish to see a film that, according to Matthew, was nothing special? You have to understand that it would no more occur to them to miss it than it would occur to a newspaper reader to cancel his order after an issue of mediocre news.

Installed in the front row of the Cinémathèque, they remained at an equal distance from critics and casual spectators; they did not covet the role either of judge or jury but saw themselves as friends, or rather guests, of the huge white screen which would thus become, for ninety minutes or so, in the manner of an embassy, part of American soil.

Since they planned to stay for the whole evening, they had brought supplies: sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs, as for a picnic. They would eat these in the garden in the intervals between films, having left Danielle's boa draped lengthwise across their seats so that they might be reclaimed.

They were talking shop: which is to say, cinema.

The conversation of the *rats* is indescribable. Everything is *sublime*. Everything is a *chef-d'oeuvre*. Even Matthew, for whom these terms

in English tended to be reserved for Michelangelo, Shakespeare and Beethoven, succumbed to the cinephilic temptation to call any half-decent film *sublime*, any one better than that a *chef-d'oeuvre*. But, as with his whole existence in Paris, there was something not quite plausible in the way he uttered the words. He was incapable of deciding whether or not they ought to be picked up between the ironic pincers of quotation marks, just as someone unaccustomed to dining out will hesitate before an array of knives and forks.

He failed to understand that words, like money, were subject to a fluctuating rate of exchange and that, in view of a very Parisian tendency to linguistic inflation, the *sublime* and the *chef-d'oeuvre* had become overvalued currencies.

Only those who have to translate ideas from one language into another will ever be sensitive to such nuances. For Guillaume and Danielle the discrepancy never arose. Hence there was, to Matthew's ears, something *truly* sublime about the unselfconscious ease with which they tossed these words back and forth, making them as light as shuttlecocks.

Dazzled, he was afraid that he would be left far behind, that beside their lyricism his own insipid enthusiasm would strike them as damning with faint praise. So he took to agreeing with them. He made it his job to be agreeable.

If Danielle was flattered by this attitude she showed no sign of it.

As a matter of fact, he was agreeing with some remark she had made as they walked down the path to the Cinémathèque entrance.

'My little Matthew,' Danielle at once snapped back at him, 'when two people agree, it means one of them is unnecessary.'

Matthew bit his lip.

Yet, in spite of her severity, rendered less crushing by the fact that, just in the last few days, she had begun to call him *tu* – whereas Guillaume had done so ten minutes into their very first conversation – he would go on agreeing with her. He was like the player who would rather fumble the ball on the winning side than score a goal for the losers.

'I've never thought of it like that,' he answered helplessly, 'but I imagine you're right.'

Danielle threw her head back and laughed. 'Oh, God, what's the use? You're incurable.'

'Stop teasing him,' Guillaume told her. 'Can't you see how he hates it?'

'Nonsense. He adores it. He's a glutton – no, a gourmet – for punishment.'

Matthew stared at this terrible young woman whom he loved in his fashion. With her boa she resembled a mischievous fox cub in a Beatrix Potter ballet.

'You despise me, I know,' he said.

'On the contrary,' she replied, 'I think you're awfully nice. We both do. You're really the nicest person we know. *N'est-ce pas*, Guillaume?'

Her exaggerated, drawn-out whinny of *n'est-ce pas, Guillaume* was a comedian's catchphrase. If you wanted to imitate her, it was there you would start.

'Don't listen to her, Matthew,' said Guillaume. 'She's a bitch. She breathes up all the air around her.'

They had just arrived in the Cinémathèque garden.

Every great city has its characteristic sound. New York's would be the howl of a police car siren, heard far below in the street and whose itinerary a native New Yorker is capable of tracking in his ear, from one intersection to the next, almost to the offender's front door. London's might be the clatter of an empty lager can rolling back and forward across the floor of a Tube carriage as it hurtles through a tunnel. And that of Paris is conversation. Parisians breathe conversation. Deprived of conversation they would shrivel up and die.

But, of the countless conversations which fill the air of Paris, each also boasts its own characteristic sound, its *tenor*, making it easy to distinguish one from the other.

In the garden as usual there stood groups of cinephiles. They were conversing in low voices. They appeared vaguely conspiratorial. One would not have been too astonished to see a big black bomb with a lighted fuse sticking out from underneath one of the shabby raincoats or anoraks most of them were wearing.

At first glance it was identical to the scene that had been replayed there evening after evening at the same hour. But only at a first glance. Something was not quite right, something had changed. The *rats* were not talking shop.

Apprehensive, Guillaume strode ahead of the others and went to look at the Cinémathèque's entrance. The gates were locked. From either side of the padlock a thick steel chain hung in twin half-circles, reminding him of the ostentatious sort of fob-watch chains

worn by fat capitalists in Soviet propaganda films. In the middle, someone had strung up, askew, a crudely handwritten cardboard sign: *Fermé*.

To satisfy himself he ran down the stairs three at a time and squinted through the upright bars of the grille. Inside, the foyer was unlighted. The floor, which had not been swept that afternoon, was littered with ticket stubs. The box-office was unattended. The shadowboxes and magic lanterns, which helped to distract impatient patrons with their paper seagulls, their naked athletes and their equestriennes condemned to leap endlessly through a ring of little metal hoops, sat undisturbed.

Guillaume felt pins and needles all over him. He looked the way Newton must have looked the moment the apple, or rather the penny, dropped.

An addict denied his fix could not have had a more frightening expression on his face.

'*Salut*.'

Guillaume turned round quickly. His distracted state made the simple greeting resonate like a pistol shot going off in his ear.

It was Jacques, one of the most fanatical of the *rats*. He had the streaky features of a debauched greyhound. With his long stained suede greatcoat, his bulging shoulder bag, his grimy boots, inside which his trouser legs had been clumsily tucked, his cocainy white face and his horrible matted, thinning hair, one would have said a scarecrow that the crows had scared.

'*Salut*, Jacques.'

'Say, Guillaume, you couldn't . . .'

Guillaume, who knew that Jacques intended to ask him for a few francs, cut him short.

It was a familiar ritual. But Jacques was no ordinary beggar. His petitions were invariably 'to help pay for the editing of my film'. If no one had ever seen this film, stranger things had happened after all, and masterpieces had been fashioned from less money than Jacques must have managed to scrounge off his fellow cinephiles over the years.

These days, it had become less easy for him. Knowing that by force of habit he rummaged through the litter bin at the top of the Métro stairs on the place du Trocadéro, three of his acquaintances had bought a pornographic magazine in Pigalle, selected the most lascivious of its illustrations, had a cartoon strip balloon issue from

the lady's gaping pudenda, inside which one of them had written *bonjour, Jacques* in a spidery hand, and on their way in to the Cinémathèque at six-thirty had carefully planted it where they could be certain he would filch it on his way out at midnight.

Ever since that incident, which had unfolded without a hitch, Jacques had exiled himself from the front row and hardly exchanged a word with the others. Guillaume was well aware of being the sole friend remaining to whom he made overtures for money, but he retained an affection for this pitiful creature whom he had known in better days.

For her part, Danielle would have nothing to do with him. She claimed that he was not clean, that he smelled bad. 'If shit could shit,' she said once, 'the turds it deposited would look and smell like your friend Jacques.'

Guillaume was questioning Jacques about the closed gates. Danielle did not join them. She stood a little way off and lit a cigarette, which for her was no mean affair.

She was an addicted smoker. Without a cigarette between her fingers she felt like a courtesan without her gaudy rings. Yet addicts are cunning. They soon learn how to outsmart their addiction. This was Danielle's stratagem. She would take a cigarette from the pack and first detach the filter tip. Then, with two sharp bites of her thumb and index finger nails, she divided what was left into three equal lengths and inserted one of the neatly incised stubs into an ivory holder. In this way she let herself smoke forty cigarettes a day without using up a whole pack.

As for Matthew, he was gazing with a day-dream eye at the Eiffel Tower, whose welded cross-hatching had just that instant lit up as swiftly as though it had been consumed by fire. It looked, in the fading light, like a five-pointed star fashioned out of wire that a child had disentangled and was incapable of getting back into shape again.

The news that Guillaume received from Jacques could scarcely have been worse. Langlois had been dismissed! Henri Langlois, the Cinémathèque's curator, he whom Cocteau called 'the dragon who guards our treasures', had been evicted by Malraux, de Gaulle's Minister of Culture.

Guillaume was completely at sea. •

'But what do you mean, he's been sacked?'

'It's all I know,' replied Jacques, who was still angling for an opening in the conversation in order to borrow money. 'He's gone – and the Cinémathèque is closed till further notice. But I say, Guillaume –'

'Why would Malraux do such a thing? It doesn't make sense.'

'Oh, the old story. The chaos, the disorder, the megalomania. You've heard it all before.'

It was true that Langlois did not resemble other curators. It was said of him that he kept cans of film inside his bathtub, that he had mislaid irreplaceable copies of great classics; but also that, during the war, he had rescued prints the way others rescued parachutists. Dressed to kill, or at least to maim, in one of those monstrous, flapping, triple- or quadruple-breasted suits he affected, he would pace the Cinémathèque stage like some sea captain on the bridge of his schooner, while the tall white mainsail of the screen unfurled behind him.

Langlois's notion of guarding treasures was to pass them around. He was an eccentric curator. He liked to show films. He believed it was good for them to be run through a projector. In this he differed from certain of his colleagues who insisted that projection was harmful to a film – which is a bit like saying that smiling is harmful to a face.

Yet projection, like smiling, does produce wrinkles. These colleagues therefore accused Langlois of squandering the nation's patrimony. Films, they said, were no longer being kept in bathtubs.

Even so, it was quite unthinkable that he should have been deposed so unceremoniously from his throne. He had become as much of an institution as the institution he had founded.

Guillaume, who almost never read a newspaper, now urgently wanted to buy one. Details, he wanted details. So, mechanically scooping up a cluster of coins from his pocket, he pressed them into Jacques's palm without first sifting through them. Considering the news Jacques had imparted to him, he could almost imagine he was paying off an informant.

Danielle and Matthew were thunderstruck by the turn of events.

Danielle was not the type of woman who cannot help suspecting, when she laughs, that she is slumming. On the contrary, she had never been afraid to laugh out loud, with her entire being; and, when she was astonished, her eyes would open as wide as those of a

child and one would be pleasantly surprised by an equally childlike intake of breath. That laugh, that intake of breath fleshed her out. Without them she might have remained as ethereal and immaterial as a hologram.

'It isn't true,' she pronounced with a clairvoyant's conviction. 'There's been a mistake, you'll see. Langlois is on the carpet for some minor infraction. The Cinémathèque will open tomorrow – maybe later tonight.'

She was like someone comfortably seated in an armchair who hears a shot and tells herself it is just a car backfiring.

'Listen, Danielle,' said Guillaume, 'take that grisly dead fox away from your ears and listen for once. I'm telling you what Jacques told me, no more, no less.'

'What does Jacques know?'

'He had it from Victor Peplum' (Victor Peplum was another of the *rats*, so nicknamed because of his passion for cheap Italian epics, the kind that feature brawny Macistes and Hercules rippling obscene biceps beneath their dainty togas) 'who had it from one of the ticket collectors. Langlois has gone for good.'

'You'll see,' said Danielle, and she tapped her forefinger knowingly against the side of her nose.

The cinephiles had meanwhile dispersed to drink *menthes à l'eau* in one of the cafés bordering the place du Trocadéro. The light in the garden had turned soft, homogeneous, almost invisible, with not the slightest breeze to disturb its evenly diffused lustre. Enveloped in this half-light – itself raked at regular intervals by another, much more concentrated light, from the Seine's left bank, the luminous cone balanced like a gyroscope on the topmost point of the Eiffel Tower – the shrubbery had begun to grow shadowy, batlike wings evoking the eccentric statuary of the cemetery at Genoa.

Near the Cinémathèque grille a youthful couple, incongruously bronzed, sat enlaced together on a bench. Repeatedly, and without respite, this couple assaulted each other on the mouth. Readjusting the angle of their necks, their shoulders, their arms, like acrobats positioning themselves for a triple somersault, they scarcely ever came up for air. And so earthy, primitive, unashamed was their lovemaking that an anthropologist could have mistaken it for some tribal rite of passage – the mating dance of two tans.

Matthew shivered. The sight of their glowing complexions made him feel whey-faced.

'What are we going to do now?'

Guillaume wanted to buy *Le Monde*. He would do so on their way home. First they would eat their sandwiches and boiled eggs on the Trocadéro esplanade.

The esplanade was jammed. The evening, being mild, had brought out the fauna of this enchanted plateau. On the precipitous slope descending from the esplanade itself to the Seine embankment someone had aligned an evenly spaced row of Coca-Cola bottles, in and out of which the roller-skaters would slalom at terrifying speeds, hunching their bodies backward like nutcrackers, and only stopping themselves from pitching head first into the river by the curlicue of a last-minute sideways skid. Wearing a thin blue vest and sawn-off denim shorts, an immensely tall, slender black shoe-shine boy, whose own burnished skin could have served to advertise his trade, had put his shoe box aside for the moment, fastened on a pair of roller-skates and started majestically to skate in a circle, quite erect, his arms raised horizontally on either side of his body, in the posture of a crucified black Jesus. Sleek silken hair sprouted from the armpits of the Cross.

They found a sheltered spot overlooking the scene and sat there, dangling their legs and biting on their crusty baguette sandwiches.

By a tacit accord they did not mention Langlois, or the cinema. It was Danielle who spoke. As a Trappist monk takes a vow of silence, she had taken a vow of conversation. She annotated the spectacle that lay spread out at their feet. She played God. Insolently staring at a teenage girl with eyes like brown marbles, an olive skin and the inkling of a moustache, she would remark, 'Yes, to be sure, that type obviously had to exist, whatever you think of it.' Or, of a blond young man, the transparent rims of whose glasses softened what might otherwise have been a too piercing gaze, 'I dare say I'd have given him finer cheekbones' (meaning: if I were God) 'but, really, the overall effect is not bad, not bad at all.' Or else, when they sighted this amazing couple walking near the fountains: two albino and apparently blind brothers, identical twins, in their thirties, both dressed exactly the same way, both carrying white canes which they tapped in time together, left, right, left, right, as smartly drilled as guardsmen, 'Well! I can't say I'd ever have thought of that!'

They finished eating. It started to rain. Danielle, who would not

go out in 'weather that *touches* me', insisted that they take the Métro, even if both Matthew and Guillaume would have preferred to saunter home along the quays of the Seine.

They got out of the Métro at Odéon. Guillaume and Danielle went to their parents' dark, book-lined flat between the place de l'Odéon and the church of Saint-Sulpice. Their father was a poet of secure but cultish reputation. Every five years he would publish a slim volume with seldom more than nine or ten subtly and exquisitely laid-out words to a page.

Matthew said goodbye to them and walked back alone to his hotel room in the Casbah of the Latin Quarter.

This 'two-star' hotel was an Arab brothel more or less, squeezed in on both sides by second-hand bookshops, jeans emporia, tiny art-house cinemas that managed to thrive on a Spartan diet of Bergman and Antonioni, and the sort of Tunisian *charcuterie* that for a franc would sell you a delicious lamb or mutton kebab freshly sliced from a joint in the form of an inverted pyramid or a gummy pastry with a glutinous honey or lemon filling. Its courtyard, the very one in which a convulsive fit of hiccoughs had exploded in his brain like machine-gun fire, had the soundtrack of a neo-realist Italian film: dance band music, a baby crying, someone practising sol-fa or 'Für Elise' on a poorly tuned piano.

Sleep is a spirit that does not materialise at will. It soon comes to depend, like most spirits, on the trappings of the seance: the veiled lamps, the drawn curtains, the patience and the silence. It depends, too, above all, on the sleeper's gullibility, his naïve readiness to believe that within a very few minutes, if he puts his house in order prior to his departure, he will enter a self-induced trance. Only then does it consent to be invoked, and to spew forth the opaque and terrible ectoplasm of dreams.

Matthew distrusted the occult enticements of sleep. That night, however, he dreamt. His dream was also confused with a real memory. He was in London, on his way to the National Gallery. The streets that encircled Trafalgar Square were crowded. So he found himself on a traffic island waiting for the lights to turn green. Standing on the pavement opposite, in front of the National Gallery, a young (American? German? Swedish?) boy of incomparable physical loveliness, who could have fallen out of a Tiepolo altarpiece,

was waiting to cross from the other side. Matthew's eyes welled up with tears, the kind of tears which only such an extreme manifestation of beauty will inspire and which, like incompatible liquids inside a scientist's test-tube, will never mix with shallower ones. He had not the least suspicion of what was about to befall him. For it was only when the youth began to walk across the street that one saw how totally disarticulated his limbs were. Withered by a neurological ailment, he walked like a slapstick clown, crazily flinging his knees out as he advanced.

The two incompatible species of tears suddenly merged in Matthew's eyes. Racked by pity for this ravishing monster, he wanted to step forward, clasp him gently on both shoulders, tell onlookers to stand back and make room as when someone has fainted, then kiss him on the forehead and command him to walk erect. Whereupon Matthew would slip away unseen in the crowd, many of whom, dumbfounded by the miracle, would drop to their knees in prayer.

In short, he had a Christ complex, an uncodified psychic category that exists none the less.

That was where the memory came to an end. The dream took over. In it Matthew rushed to the youth's defence against jeering passers-by. He cried out, *But his heart is in the right place!* – doubtless the very words, spoken with a certain desperation, of the surgeons who examined the Elephant Man. It was now at him that the passers-by, like a lynch mob, started mockingly to point, screaming, *But his heart is in the wrong place! His heart is in the wrong place!* Danielle, her face as contorted with hate as a Bacchante's, stood in the forefront of this mob. Then he noticed that the youth was perched on the top of Nelson's Column, brandishing the Cinémathèque screen as though it were some great yellow quarantine flag. Matthew laboriously began to shin up the column. He was in excruciating pain. The column seemed to sway. Far below, the crowd stoned him, urged on by Danielle and Guillaume. He reached the top. In rapid succession the boy turned into Nelson, Napoleon, then himself again. A shot rang out. On the Cinémathèque screen was projected the logo of Paramount Pictures: a mountain of snow surmounted by a tiara of stars. Still brandishing the yellow flag, he and the youth ascended heavenwards together in an elongated swoon, enhaloed by the Paramount stars like a Madonna and Child by Murillo.

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A second shot was heard. It was the telephone. Matthew glanced at the alarm clock on his bedside table: in reality, he had slept no more than seven minutes. Guillaume was ringing to say that, after their separation at the place de l'Odéon, he had remembered to buy *Le Monde*.

The Langlois affair, as journalists were already calling it, had been splashed over the front page.

It was extraordinary. So singlemindedly had the three young people focused their scrutiny on the Cinémathèque's screen, they had remained in total ignorance of what had been taking place behind it. The *coup d'état* had been as well planned as a commando raid. That evening's closure was merely the *coup de grâce*, necessitated by the scores of telegrams that had been arriving at the Ministry, telegrams from film-makers around the world who had donated prints of their films to Langlois, and to Langlois alone, and who refused to authorise any screening of them in the wake of his departure. A Committee of Support had been instituted, with its headquarters in the cramped offices of the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. What is more, those members of the Cinémathèque's staff who were not prepared to recognise the authority of the newly appointed curator – a certain Pierre Barbin, whose name served only to personalise his anonymity – had been dismissed on the spot.

From this broadside Matthew retained a single fact, which he formulated in his mind as a theorem in logic: the Cinémathèque had closed its doors. It was at the Cinémathèque that he met Guillaume and Danielle. *Ergo*, he would cease to meet them.

The shadow cast on to the wall by the telephone assumed the shape of a revolver against his head.

'Does that mean I won't see you tomorrow?'

There was silence on the line.

Then, from far away:

'You mean, go to Chaillot in any case? It might not be a bad idea at that. Perhaps it'll all have been straightened out.'

'No, I meant . . .'

'What?'

Matthew had always been willing to yield to the drift of events. He had been content to let it unfold him and bear him aloft as, at the end of some ridiculous but moving film they had chanced to see together, Edith Piaf was borne upwards to Heaven on the Montmartre funicular, while the word *Fin* gradually advanced to the foreground of the screen like a train emerging out of a tunnel. In the

matter of choosing a film to see, a restaurant to dine in or a direction to take, he had always left the initiative to others.

Now, for the first time in their friendship, he would venture to make a proposition to Guillaume.

'Couldn't we meet in the afternoon? I don't know. Maybe have a drink together?'

The telephone is also a kind of keyhole. The ear spies on the voice. And better than a radio tuner it sifts out the inessential. Guillaume, to whom had never occurred the idea of meeting Matthew in this extra-curricular manner – for he was not unlike the schoolboy who will indiscriminately play with his fellows in the recreation ground while inviting only a select few home for a meal – had tuned into a faint signal of distress from his voice.

'Well . . .' he replied, at first doubtfully, 'I'll have to cut a class. Hell, why not? Okay, let's meet at the Rhumerie at three. Do you know it?'

His was the tone of someone who gives orders without stopping to wonder whether they will be obeyed, who keeps people waiting in the certitude that they will wait.

'Near Saint-Germain-des-Prés? Oh yes, I know it,' Matthew mumbled gratefully into the telephone. 'I'll see you there.'

For Matthew their friendship was a tightrope act. But each time the tightrope was stretched over a different abyss. He dragged the quilt up as far as his chin and closed his eyes. On this occasion he had crossed safely to the other side.

Outside, along the boulevard, could be heard the tuneless hee-haw of a police car siren.

Waiting. Matthew was waiting. He had been sitting on one of the wicker seats in the enclosed, dun-coloured terrace of the Rhumerie since ten to three, nursing, as they say, his lemonade. It was now quarter-past. That, at least, was the time announced by a clock on the boulevard opposite him. Matthew, who had slim, brittle, slightly squared-off wrists, never wore a wrist-watch: its buckle and strap against his veins would make him feel as queasy as though a doctor were permanently taking his pulse. So he was obliged to rely on street clocks. And the first clock he saw so tended to impress him as telling the correct time that, no matter by how many clocks it might subsequently be contradicted, he would continue to place his faith in it.

Waiting. For the person who waits, the paradox of Zeno, which

denies the completion of all movement, is less of a paradox than a lived experience. Matthew was living the paradox. For Guillaume to leave his parents' flat then cover the short distance to the Rhumerie (he told himself), he would first have to reach the boulevard Saint-Germain. But, before arriving at the boulevard, he would have to cross the carrefour de l'Odéon and, before the carrefour de l'Odéon, there would be the rue de Condé to walk down and, before that, the kerb of the pavement to step off – and so on, to the point where he must still be standing petrified, *statufied*, on the threshold of his bedroom, with an arm half in and half out of his jacket sleeve, as poignant a spectacle as a victim of the Pompeii earthquake.

As he waited, Matthew distractedly watched a group of young Americans who were strolling past him. They were tortoises stooping beneath the weight of their rucksacks. With their shawls and kaftans, moccasins, tinted granny glasses, guitars, leathery water flasks and bewildered children in tow, they would mysteriously know to gather at the intersection of the boulevard Saint-Germain and the boulevard Saint-Michel. It was their reservation. There they blissfully drew on marijuana joints, passing them round as though they were peace pipes. And it became so hard to envisage them in any other *quartier* that one was tempted to believe their charter aeroplanes had landed directly on the place Saint-Michel, taxiing to a halt between the fountain and the Arab touts who dealt out hashish from one pocket and discount Métro tickets from the other. For them, Paris was merely the first stopover on the route to Kathmandu.

From time to time he fancied that he spied Guillaume, only to realise his error a second later. It is a trap that almost no one can escape: a trap, because, when the person one is waiting for arrives at last, one does not then entertain a moment of doubt that it is he. Everyone else around him fades into a pixilated blur – as when a film cameraman alters the focus of his image – and the person who waits feels at once that a burden has been lifted from his heart.

The pressure was still being exerted on Matthew's heart, and it was now twenty past three.

The Chinese have a proverb: *When you keep someone waiting you give him time to count up your faults*. It was characteristic of Matthew that he should, instead, count up his own. For it was, so he thought, his

own faults rather than Guillaume's that prevented the latter from being on time for the appointment. Danielle, well and good: her superiority crushed him utterly. When in her presence he would always remember too late, much too late, what it was he had intended to say. But in Guillaume he believed he had detected a grandeur that was not of an order to make him feel small.

As it happens, this was only partially true. There were times, certainly, when he and Guillaume chatted as equals, indulging in the delirious discourse of cinephiles with less inhibition than was possible in Danielle's company. Even then, though, a spectral Danielle, so wraithlike as to be almost imperceptible, with her wit, her mock obsequiousness, her *n'est-ce pas, Guillaume,* would flickeringly take possession of her brother, as in those composite photographs where two profiles are superimposed to produce a third face, one viewed full on, that of a total stranger.

It was the stranger whom Matthew loved. But his love undermined him. He would find himself stammering like a bashful swain in some rustic farce. The simplest sentence became a tongue-twister.

Matthew was still waiting. The elation he had felt when he replaced the telephone receiver the previous evening had been extinguished. Here he was again on the tightrope, stretched over a new abyss. It was almost twenty-five past.

On the pavement outside the Rhumerie stood a street musician, a young Moroccan violinist. He was playing, more or less ably, the song 'Vilja' from *The Merry Widow*. Matthew studied him attentively from behind the glass enclosure. Every so often, whenever there was a dying phrase in the haunting, taunting melody, he would retrieve it at the very last minute with a twitch of his bow and appear to wrap it around his instrument as though it were one of those swathes of soft marshmallow one sees hanging in country fairs.

The musician was looking straight ahead of him. Though he was smiling as he played, he made others melancholic just to think about him. He carried the germ of that melancholia within him the way certain people may be carriers of an infectious disease: they do not succumb to it themselves but unwittingly pass it on.

This was one of the moments when Matthew was very vulnerable to such infection. He saw himself as the antiheroic protagonist of a film, the sort of pretentious French film he most disliked. He was a sensitive outcast making his solitary way along sparkling, neon-lit boulevards amid cheerful, bustling crowds moving in the opposite

direction. The film's background music would be provided exclusively by buskers, all of them the genuine article, recruited by the director himself in a widely publicised scouting expedition through streets, squares, parks and Métro corridors. And its theme tune – 'Vilja', precisely – would be relayed from instrument to instrument, from busker to busker, from the scatty old crone at the Flore with a grin as wide and creased as her squeezebox, to the blind Jew's-harpist whose patch was the place Monge, as though it were pursuing him across Paris.

It was half past three when Guillaume finally arrived, walking unhurriedly along the boulevard. He was not alone. Danielle, bored to distraction at home by her father's books, cats and musty pipe racks, had decided to join them. She was dressed in a prewar 'little suit' by Chanel. Ornately cuffed and buttoned, it was at least two sizes too tight for her. Since Guillaume was wearing his regulation corduroy jacket, corduroy trousers and sandals, the two of them gratified Matthew by causing a minor sensation among the middle-class dowagers with their glowing hot toddies, their Hermès scarves and their inexhaustible fund of medical and pharmaceutical horror stories who, along with the odd laconic, bespectacled loner reading *Le Monde* or *Le Nouvel Observateur*, made up the Rhumerie's clientele.

Neither Guillaume nor Danielle apologised for coming half an hour late. It had never occurred to them that he might no longer be there. Guillaume ran his eyes over the drinks menu and Danielle picked up a paperback volume that Matthew had left on the table. Its title was *I Ragazzi terribili*. Flicking through its pages, she said, 'What? You read Cocteau in Italian? Molto chic!'

Matthew took the trouble to explain to her that, to keep up his Italian, the language of his forefathers, he read only those books he already knew by heart.

But Danielle paid scant attention. She had just discovered a new expression. She savoured it amorously. From now on everything that once had been sublime – a film, a Worth gown, a Coromandel screen, a hothouse exploding with tropical blooms – would be molto chic. Like those devotees of the expand-your-vocabulary column in the *Reader's Digest* who stake their conversational reputation on the number of times in a single day they manage to use *plethora* or *infelicity* or *quintessential*, dropping such words the way other people drop names, she hated to let any amusing phrase go once it had caught her fancy.

It might be a quotation. For instance, Napoleon's 'People are prepared to believe almost anything provided it is not in the Bible', which, though no practising Catholic herself, far from it, she was fond of quoting whether it was apropos or not.

Or else it was a whimsical pet name that would attach itself to the designated object for ever afterwards. Her cigarettes, which were Russian and looked like decadent mauve lipsticks, she re-baptised 'Rasputins'. And if ever she stubbed one out in an ashtray, and it continued to smoulder on after several attempts to suffocate it, Danielle would simper, as though impromptu, 'Why, it simply refuses to die! It's a Rasputin!'

Guillaume and Matthew, in the meantime, consulting the Cinémathèque's mimeographed programme, decided that it might be wisest to take the Métro to Chaillot at six o'clock as though nothing were amiss. By doing so they hoped to catch fate unawares. Since they had refrained from buying a morning newspaper, there was still the possibility, no matter how remote, that the situation had returned to normal.

A cool but not unpleasantly overcast afternoon lay before them.

'We might take in a film,' Matthew proposed. 'I mean, in a cinema.'

'There's nothing to see,' Guillaume replied. He moodily removed the pink paper parasol that protected his ice cream from the beams of some, as yet, invisible sun and shunted its tiny webbed canopy up and down, open and shut. 'Look for yourself.'

He drew an ink-stained copy of that week's *Pariscope* from the depths of his jacket pocket and tossed it over to Matthew.

The films were listed in alphabetical order and it was Guillaume's practice, every Wednesday morning when the magazine went on sale, to scribble a disjointed little star opposite the title of any film that they had already seen. There was hardly a page whose margin did not consist of an almost unbroken vertical line of Guillaume's stars.

'In any case,' he went on, 'we'd have to go to a four o'clock show, which means we'd be late for the Cinémathèque.'

A derisive voice interrupted them.

'You must be mad.'

Danielle's pale, unrouged lips were pursed in distaste.

Guillaume reddened, as though he had just been overheard by a stranger. He muttered, 'What's eating you all of a sudden?'

'You do realise you are being ridiculous beyond words? Both of you. Surely you understand, the Cinémathèque is closed. Closed.

Going to Chaillot this evening is therefore an utter waste of time and you both know it. If you weren't such cowards, you'd buy a newspaper and save the price of a Métro ticket.'

One need not be clairvoyant to know in advance what a fortune teller is going to read in one's palm. Long sea voyages, tall dark strangers: the stereotyped repertoire would be disavowed by the most hackneyed of sentimental novelists. Danielle was of a different species. Though she would issue communiqués on each and every subject with the adamant aplomb of a fortune teller, she was capable of reversing her own previously held convictions as cavalierly as anyone else's.

'In the first place,' was her brother's reply, 'a paper costs more than a Métro ticket. In the second place, it was you yourself who swore that Langlois would be reinstated no later than today. And, in the third place, no one that I know of has invited you to come with us just as no one invited you to come out with me in the first place.'

His irritation at Danielle allayed by the number, the force and the unexpectedly ingenious circularity of his own arguments, Guillaume lapsed into silence and started fidgeting with the parasol again.

She stepped up the pressure.

'Oh, I'm coming all right. If only to see your face when you find the grille is shut. What a picture it was last night! For a moment I thought you'd stuck your nose through the railing and got it wedged! You looked as if you were ready to blub. Matthew, didn't he revolt you, weren't you ashamed to be with him? I mean to say, a boy of seventeen who carries on like a kid in front of a toyshop window. Have you ever seen anything quite so abject? So ignoble? I'm sorry to say, my brother is just as pathetic as the others. As Peplum. As Jacques. He's a born loser. *N'est-ce pas*, Matthew?'

Matthew dared not intervene. He sat tight-lipped, feeling never more of an outsider than during these scenes. His silence was the silence of a pyjama-clad infant standing alone in the middle of the night, intently clutching a teddy bear, listening at his parents' bedroom door, behind which insults are being exchanged that can never be taken back.

Guillaume had said nothing during Danielle's tirade. Instead, he had been tugging with such violence on the lever of the parasol that it had ended by flip-flopping inside out, like an umbrella on a gusty day.

Danielle flashed him a maliciously saccharine smile. With the triumphant 'ta-da!' of an illusionist she took a tube of Smarties from

the pocket of the 'little suit'. It was a sweet for which she had a passion. Humming the 'Skaters' waltz under her breath, she flipped off the small yellow plastic lid. Then, still with the slow-motion fluency of a professional magician, she raised the tube to her lips, let the few remaining chocolate drops roll down on to her tongue and poked her finger into the tube to demonstrate that it was empty. Next she turned it upside down and pried loose the little round cardboard bottom. Extricating it from inside the cylinder, she posed it flat on her right cheek, screwed up her face and tipped her head back so that the piece of cardboard would not be dislodged. Then, slowly turning to face Matthew, coquettishly fluttering her eyelashes, she enquired:

'Matthew darling, who does this remind you of?'

Matthew was aghast, so much so that he did not properly take in Danielle's *darling*, which was none the less a momentous development in their relationship. Nor did he dare look straight at Guillaume, on whose right cheek, at the spot exactly corresponding to where Danielle had posed the piece of cardboard, there was a conspicuous scar, quite circular in form, the result of a bungled operation to remove a mole. Guillaume had never alluded to this scar in Matthew's presence. It was, so Matthew understood, a taboo never to be breached by either of them. Matthew respected the taboo. Yet he would have liked Guillaume to know how fond he was of his scar, how it endowed his features with a Byronic nobility and virility, how he had long secretly nurtured a craving to kiss it.

Beauty is perfection with flaws. Guillaume's scar was nothing less than the finishing touch to his facial beauty – the flaw that drew it, as it were, *beyond* perfection, that pulled it into shape, like the one artless black dot with which Hokusai was said to have completed his self-portrait and which transformed what had been an inchoate doodle into the artist's living image.

Danielle's appalling little wheeze, however, had breached that taboo, and too soon, much too soon. Perhaps it was he, Matthew, whom Guillaume would be unable to forgive.

Guillaume might have done anything. He might have stormed out of the café, thrown what remained of his ice cream in his sister's face, impaled her on the needle-cusped handle of the tiny parasol.

As it turned out, he started to laugh. The likeness was truly

uncanny. It was almost as though he were staring at his reflection in a funfair mirror that had been craftily contrived to alter the gender of the person who confronts himself in it.

The fuse had been mended.

'Idiot!' said Guillaume, scrunching up his features to match hers in grotesquerie. So alike did they appear just then, so like two gargoyles on one of the parapets of Notre-Dame, that when Danielle pressed too hard on the cardboard, causing it to pop off her cheek and land on the table, Matthew dreamily expected Guillaume's scar to do likewise.

'But since you don't think we ought to go to the Cinéma-thèque . . .' Guillaume began to say.

'Well, but *of course* we ought to go to the Cinémathèque,' she replied with a grin. She had been teasing him all along. 'There hasn't been any question of not going. What I can't stomach is the sight of you two drooling over the programme just like your awful chums.'

'So what do you propose?'

'What do I propose?' she said, doing her famous imitation of Peter Lorre. 'This . . .' Then she leaned forward, addressing them in a barely audible whisper, as in those film sequences that fade out just as the conspirator-in-chief is about to unveil his scheme for taking over the world.

Coincidences occur all around us, except that no one sees them, no one understands them.

A woman travelling in a railway compartment requests a light from a fellow passenger. This passenger lays aside his detective story and proffers his lighter. She thanks him politely, and neither gives the matter another thought. A year later they are married in a small parish church some five hundred miles away, still none the wiser.

The proximity of Danielle's proposal to Matthew's dream of the previous night constituted just such a coincidence. But because Matthew had forgotten his dream before he could recount it, neither would ever comprehend that a knot had been tied that only death would cut and time unravel.

What Danielle proposed was this. In his free time, the time he was able to snatch from attendance at classes and at the Cinémathèque, Guillaume drew up inventories of his favourite films in scrupulously dated loose-leaf folders which he purchased at Gibert Jeune and

which, when they were filled, he ranged in chronological order. Sucking industriously on his pen, he would list in one folder his hundred favourite films of all time; in another, which was far more dog-eared, his hundred best films of each successive year. He had been filling these up and carefully ranging them away since he was ten and in that time they had undergone considerable revision. But there was a film to which Guillaume had always remained loyal: Godard's *Bande à part*, with its three roguish protagonists who in one scene speed through the salons and corridors of the Louvre in an endeavour to break the speed record – nine minutes and forty-five seconds – for viewing, or squinting at, the museum's assembled treasures. And it was Danielle's proposal that they attempt the feat in their turn.

The idea enchanted Guillaume. It would be a gesture of resistance, an act of quixotic defiance against the Cinémathèque's closure. If films could not be screened there, very well, *very well*, they would take them into the streets. Into the Louvre itself, if need be. Giggling together like children embarked upon some private mischief, he and Danielle tore off a corner of the paper tablecloth and marked out the best itinerary.

In vain Matthew advised caution. Fearful of drawing attention to himself, he implored them to think twice. He was concerned that he, a foreigner, risked finding himself in an awkward situation if they chanced to be caught. He saw himself summarily deported, sent home to San Diego in disgrace, his studies abandoned, his future compromised. For him the beauty of the cinema was that it confined its thaumaturgical properties, the potency of its insidious magic, to the charmed rectangle of the white screen: the rest of the world lay out of bounds to it.

He was like one of those people who visit the fairground as amused and passive onlookers all the while secretly dreading the moment when they will be hustled aboard the roller coaster by their more boisterous companions.

But Guillaume and Danielle had established an impregnable front against him. Like every couple, in whatever manner conjoined, they formed a two-headed eagle, now pecking each other's eyes out, now fondly nuzzling each other's moist beaks. Two against one – or rather, two against the world – they brushed his objections aside.

On the place Saint-Germain-des-Prés the Deux-Magots was

crowded. A sword swallower was performing for the café patrons. His face wore the ecstatic grimace of one committing the act of fellatio. On the far side of the square, patiently waiting his turn to go on stage, a young man, propped high on stilts, clad in a scruffy Harlequin's costume, leaned against the railing of the church. He was a gypsy. As they passed him, he crossed his stilts as nonchalantly as though he were crossing his legs.

An unnerved Matthew trailing behind, too demoralised to venture any further protest, they turned down into the rue Bonaparte, past the École des Beaux-Arts, the ugliest building in Paris, and along the street that takes its name from it, its houses digging their heels in and lurching forward like sightseers watching a procession go past. On their right, as they approached the quai Voltaire, was Degas's ballerina in her rusty metal tutu. On their left, directly opposite it, a statue of Voltaire himself, who seemed almost to be following Matthew's progress with his wrinkled stone eyes and smiling down at this young American Candide as sarcastically as the Beast's living statues smile at Beauty in *La Belle et la Bête*.

With two hearts as light as cork, the third as heavy as lead, they crossed the river at the Pont du Carrousel.

Near that bridge, on the embankment of the Seine, lined with kiosk after kiosk selling second-hand books, like a flooded city shored up with thousands of little white sandbags, there stood a couple, a boy and girl, their bodies half-obscured by a Morris column advertising recitals at the Salle Gaveau and the latest three-act farces. Both of them had shoulder-length hair, woollen tam o'shanters and grey duffel coats. They were sublimely unconscious of the world which by popular tradition they were causing to revolve. Imagine Siamese twins joined at the lips.

As they strolled over the bridge, a *bateau-mouche*, gliding swiftly beneath them, its upper and lower decks as gaily lit up as a miniature ocean liner, disappeared from one side and reappeared, magically intact, on the other.

In the distance, beyond the spruce symmetry of the gardens of the Louvre, could be seen an equestrian statue, that of Joan of Arc, her torso gleaming like chain mail in the sunlight.

Matthew found himself thinking of her poor charred remains catching at the nostrils with the acrid smell of a burnt-out firework.

Suddenly, without warning, Guillaume and Danielle shifted gear into a sprint. They were limbering up for the main event.

Slightly out of breath, they arrived at the Louvre.

*

To describe the race I would need to write a telegram unpunctuated by *stops*.

What spontaneity, what surprises! They skidded round corners with one leg in the air like Charlie Chaplin. They caused snoozing watchmen to rouse themselves with a startled snort. They scattered groups of Japanese visitors on guided tours. Masterpieces flashed past them as in a film where the camera tracks at top speed. Icons . . . Virgins alone or with Child . . . Crucifixions . . . St Anthonys and St Jeromes . . . Fra Angelicos wrapped in gold leaf like chocolate liqueurs. More Virgins . . . Susannas and Elders . . . impertinent, snub-nosed *putti* plumping up the clouds like pillows and pummelling each other with them as in a school dormitory after lights out . . . frescoes by Veronese so huge and populous one would hesitate to do a jigsaw puzzle of them . . . the Mona Lisa . . . the Venus de Milo, whose arms they broke off as they scampered past her, Danielle just ahead of Guillaume with Matthew, after a slow start, making a steady advance on the inside. Seasick monks by El Greco . . . Rembrandt self-portraits . . . Davids and Ingres . . . the Raft of the Medusa . . . then, entering the straight, now racing neck and neck, a photo-finish in front of the elegant centaur-like ladies of *La Grande Jatte* who shelter from the pointillism beneath their frilly parasols.

Not once did they collide or pitch into the outstretched arms of a watchman. Not once did they lose their footing. For they were *miracle-prone* as certain unfortunate people are said to be accident-prone.

What is more, they broke the record by seven seconds!

Three abreast, they ran out of the Louvre and did not stop running until they had left the gardens far behind them and had arrived on the quay. There they stood, bent double, gasping for breath, holding their sides as though suffering from a stitch.

The euphoria of having let herself go softened Danielle's angularity, made her eyes sparkle. She gripped the back of Matthew's neck with both hands and forced him to look straight at her.

'Oh, Matthew, my little Matthew, you were marvellous. Marvellous. *N'est-ce pas*, Guillaume?' Whereupon she kissed him lightly on the mouth.

In actual fact, Guillaume had suspected that Matthew would funk it, that, at the very last minute, he would be caught standing, poised for flight, his heart palpitating, at the starting post. Delighted that he

had passed the test, that he had not been disgraced in Danielle's eyes, he extended a fraternal hand as though he were about to tweak his ear.

But Matthew pre-empted him. Perhaps because he was still intoxicated by the capricious animal energies that the race had released in him, perhaps, as well, because he sensed an opportunity that would not soon recur, he raised himself on tiptoe and impulsively kissed him in turn.

Guillaume recoiled. Matthew's kiss, so unexpected, felt as indecently smeary as that of a baby who simply applies his lips to one's own. He seemed ready to blush, to speak, to say something irrevocable. But he was interrupted by Danielle, who began to murmur in a low and throaty voice, 'One of us . . . One of us . . .'

It took her brother just a few seconds to recognise the allusion. Smiling cryptically, he joined in the refrain:

'One of us! One of us! One of us!'

One of us. Who, having heard it, can ever forget the sinister rallying cry of the dwarfs, pinheads, bearded ladies and writhing, limbless monstrosities at the wedding feast of the midget Hans and the healthy, voluptuous trapeze artist Cleopatra in Tod Browning's film *Freaks*?

On the horizon, as inescapable as the moon itself, the lighthouse of the Eiffel Tower was already drawing them into port. Rashers of bacon streaked the sky. As Danielle, fortified by her nine-minute-and-thirty-eight-second course in art history, mused, 'Why, when nature imitates art, does it always choose the worst art to imitate? Sunsets by Harpignies, never by Monet.'

An unpleasant surprise was in store for the young people when they approached the Cinémathèque. It was impossible to enter the garden by the avenue Albert-de-Mun. Beneath its leafless trees were parked the squat granite-grey vans that they knew belonged to the paramilitary police force, the CRS. Groups of leather-jerkined CRS officers were lounging on the pavement chain-smoking Gauloises and absentmindedly stroking their truncheons and riot guns. The barred windows of the vans, as airless as casements in some castle tower, framed the heads of other officers, in profile, with their helmets on. The occasional twitch of a shoulder, the

only movement visible from outside, suggested a playing card being slapped down on a table.

Uncomprehending for the moment, Guillaume and Danielle darted across the place du Trocadéro then headed for the esplanade. Matthew followed them. Minute by minute, he could feel the exhilaration of the Louvre draining away from within him.

There was barely an inch of the esplanade still unoccupied. That evening thousands of demonstrators had come there to stand, to sit cross-legged in little semi-circles, to debate and to embrace each other.

Some of them had scrambled up on to the fountains to obtain a better view of the event and crazily sprayed those who were standing beneath them. Others, their arms linked like revellers on New Year's Eve, were swaying back and forth and humming the Beatles' 'Michelle'. Pairs of legs dangled over the graded parapets of the esplanade with the slack-limbed inertia of marionettes during the interval of a Punch and Judy show.

From time to time a famous face would drift into focus. Wasn't that Jeanne Moreau? And Catherine Deneuve, surely, behind those dark glasses? And there, in a huddle, the film-makers Truffaut, Godard and Resnais, naïvely affronting the machine-guns of the CRS with tiny hand-held cameras perched on their shoulders.

Dominating the crowd from the highest parapet of all was the actor Jean-Pierre Léaud, who, like a wilder-eyed and more demonic Jesus, was declaiming in a hoarse voice the text of a muddily photocopied tract that was simultaneously being distributed among the demonstrators below.

The tract had as its title *Les Enfants de la Cinémathèque* and it ended thus:

> Using bureaucratic pretexts, the very worst enemies of culture have reconquered this bastion of liberty.
>
> Do not allow yourself to be duped. Liberty is a privilege which is not given, it is taken. All those who love the cinema – here in France as elsewhere in the world – are with you, are with Henri Langlois!

Langlois's name doubtless constituted a signal. The crowd began to surge towards the Cinémathèque. Waving placards on which they had scrawled 'Barbin Resign!' and 'Malraux Resign!' and 'Langlois Back at Chaillot!', they waded into the garden. At the same time, in a cacophony of high-pitched whistles, truncheons erect, metal

shields raised in front of their faces, the CRS trotted out of the vans in single file and threaded a path across the avenue Albert-de-Mun, leaving unplayed hands of poker and Tarot behind them.

The demonstrators charged with their cameras, the CRS with their truncheons. And when they clashed in the middle it was with the stroboscopic slow motion with which entangled plant stems are shown to grow in time-lapse documentary films.

Now the film moves into close-up.

Here, Jean-Luc Godard is vainly attempting to reason with the legionnaires of the CRS.

There, François Truffaut, taking refuge in an open doorway, is being treated for an injury to his forehead, an injury already flecking his overcoat and red cashmere scarf with spots of a deeper red.

A young woman, the wife of the director Yves Boisset, looking despairingly about her for a familiar face, suddenly crumples to the ground, her legs buckling under her like those of a collapsible card table. At once she is surrounded by what the authorities are pleased to call 'the forces of order'. Truncheon blows rain down on her coiled-up body before she is dragged to safety.

Forced into retreat, the demonstrators return to the esplanade, those in the vanguard collapsing harum-scarum on to those in the rear, until the whole confused mass, frenzied and directionless, half marching, half running, backs into the place du Trocadéro then squeezes itself out along the avenue du Président-Wilson. Window panes rattle; the traffic is stalled; pedestrians flatten themselves against walls or cower inside entryways for fear of being trampled underfoot by a headlong rush of humanity reminiscent of one of those hurricanes to which women's names are given.

At last, where the avenue du Président-Wilson is intersected by the avenue d'Iéna, the demonstration is brought to a halt. For ahead stands yet another barrier of shields, three-deep, impenetrable, stretching from one pavement to the other.

It is twenty past seven when Godard appeals to the crowd to disperse and the esplanade is abandoned to its fauna.

Our three heroes took no sides in this *bataille de la Cinémathèque*. Like children who, in awe of its golden hunting horns, its bottles of champagne, the foxtrots and quicksteps of its horses, the scarlet

evening dress of its riders, confuse the Hunt with the Hunt Ball, they confused the cinema itself with a pitched battle in which the future of the cinema was at stake. If they were fascinated, it was with the Olympian fascination of the spectator, immune to the germs of commitment by the knowledge that he can see without being seen. So they admired the actors in their colourful costumes and eerily convincing make-up. They applauded the stars. They were content to be merely bystanders, innocent bystanders.

But the film outstayed its welcome. They left before the end. While the casualties were straggling from the battlefield, helped down the Métro stairs by those who had escaped unscathed, they were already far away, in extreme long-shot, wandering along the Left Bank, three almost imperceptible dots on the horizon.

In the carrefour de l'Odéon they found the usually routine business of taking leave of each other curiously graceless and affecting. It was just after eight o'clock. They hung about on the pavement, hopping from the right foot to the left. Because the visit to Chaillot had been in the nature of an impulse, an extemporaneous shot in the dark, they had forgotten to stock up with sandwiches. Only now did it occur to them how famished they were.

'What will you do about dinner?' Guillaume offhandedly asked Matthew. 'Have you a gas range in that hotel room of yours?'

Matthew thought of the cramped L-shaped room with its peeling yellow wallpaper and the large sheet of plate glass mounted on balsa wood that was propped up against one of the walls and served him as a mirror.

'A range? No, no, I've got nothing to cook on.'

'How do you manage in the evening?'

The question startled Matthew. Yet he was reluctant to remind Guillaume and Danielle that of late, after all, he had spent virtually every evening in their company. He had not understood that when they arrived home by the last Métro they would regularly raid the refrigerator. The sandwiches, the hard-boiled eggs, that he had dined off had been a mid-evening snack for them.

'Oh well, you know,' he lightly replied, 'I can always have a couscous or a pizza in the *quartier*. Or buy a kebab and smuggle it back in under my jacket. Unless,' he added tentatively, 'unless we all go out for a meal?'

Guillaume turned to Danielle. 'Want to?'

Danielle screwed up her face in a moue of distaste, so that it

looked like a glove puppet from which the puppeteer had removed his fingers, and finally answered no. Or rather, *na-a-ah*, her parody of a drawn-out Latin American negative that she had picked up from an Argentinian friend. 'Danielle no wanna go to some nasty restaurant in the *quartier* and have nasty couscous.'

Matthew would have liked to bite his tongue out. He ought to have known his run of good fortune would come to an end.

'Not to worry,' he said, squaring his shoulders, preparing bravely to be the first to say goodbye. 'Well, I'd better be going.'

For a moment Guillaume contemplated him with an equal mixture of irony and tenderness.

'Why don't you come back with us?'

'What do you mean?'

'Come back and have a meal with us. Shouldn't he, Danielle?'

Matthew instantly scanned Danielle's face, alert to the most infinitesimal shadow of vexation that might be playing across it.

She smiled at him. 'Yes, do, Matthew. Now that we've all kissed one another, it's certainly time you came home to meet the folks.'

This phrase, Matthew knew, was as ironic as her earlier *darling* had been. But, like any sufferer from unrequited love, *he had ceased to be particular*. The words had been enunciated. For that he was grateful. For his nocturnal reveries it was all that really mattered. For the post-mortem of each day that he conducted night after night such nuances of tone were either magnified beyond recognition if the phrase had been a slighting one, or blandly neutralised if, as here, it chanced to be an expression of mock endearment.

'I'd love to,' he said; and, deploying with her for the first time a calculated 'coltish' charm that he had previously reserved for his family in San Diego, he added almost flirtatiously, 'I thought you'd never ask.'

He no longer required a prompter. He had learned his lines.

The parents of Guillaume and Danielle lived in a first-floor flat to which one gained access by a narrow spiral staircase rising from a courtyard indistinguishable from a thousand others in the Latin Quarter. The flat itself was large, if one counted the number of rooms, but did not from any one vantage point seem to be, since each of its rooms was low-ceilinged and tiny, rendered even tinier by the ubiquitous bookcases on top of which black cats sat like ebony figurines.

Their father, the poet, was a Giacometti stick sculpture in a silk

dressing gown. This dandified fossil had the unusual habit of offering his guests cigarettes by extracting them one by one from the pockets of his monkish robe, so that their cork tips were dented by the exquisite pressure of his cigarette-slim fingers. It was hard to say whether such an affectation represented the height of elegance or the height of vulgarity.

He was a celebrated perfectionist. Writing verse, he was like a woodcutter who chops down a tree to make a matchstick. To make a second matchstick he must chop down a second tree. By matchsticks, we mean: words. He was as admired for these words as other writers are for their brilliant sentences.

There were so few of the words to each page, and so few pages to a volume of verse, that it was rare for reviews of his work not to take longer to read than the work itself.

And like all poets living above the mêlée and seldom deigning to descend from a cloud-shrouded ivory tower, he was exceptionally touchy where criticism was involved. As much scoring-out went on in his address book as in one of his manuscripts.

The children's mother had been struck down by paralysis just a few months after giving birth to them; and had died, prematurely aged, on the eve of her thirtieth birthday. Eight months later, the poet had married his secretary, who became the only mother Guillaume and Danielle had ever known.

She was a sad woman, who lived her life at the edge of a void, but very comfortably, as a millionaire might live on the shore of a Swiss lake. She tiptoed around the flat as inaudibly as one of her husband's cats – beasts to which, incidentally, she was mildly allergic, as she was to the by now inextricably blended aromas of his pipe and yellowing books.

Her role in the poet's life was to serve that rather anaemic, crabby invalid: his inspiration. She was ever at its beck and call with an unending supply of placebos – cups of watery Indian tea, inane words of encouragement and, mostly, silence. She spent the main part of each day in the flat's pygmy-sized kitchen, reading fashion magazines and nibbling on fish cakes.

This woman, who felt like screaming a dozen times a day, never raised her voice above a whisper, preserving the serenity of the household as neurotically as someone fiddling with the volume switch of a radio. Once, indeed, when Guillaume had been stretched out on his bedroom carpet listening to Ravel's 'Boléro', she had put

her head round the door so often to ask him to turn the sound down lest his father be disturbed that the famous crescendo had remained at a pianissimo level throughout. As did her own life.

In short, she existed in the world out of politeness. When in Rome . . .

When Danielle entered the drawing room her father was seated in an armchair in front of an ornate fireplace. At his elbow, beside three wobbly piles of 78s, was an old-fashioned wind-up phonograph, the kind whose calyx-shaped horn with its Loïe Fuller arabesques makes it the very emblem of *Belle époque* bewitchment.

She playfully nipped the hairs on the back of his neck.

'Papa, it's us. We're home early, as you see.'

'Nice of you,' he grunted without looking up from what he was doing: cutting open the pages of a book with a bronze paper-knife. 'Aren't you supposed to be at the Cinémathèque?'

'There's nothing on,' she said drily. 'Papa, do put that book down. We've brought someone home to meet you. This is Matthew. He's an American.'

Shambling to his feet, anxiously drawing the two sides of his robe together in front of him, the poet contemplated his guest. Having been writer-in-residence at a small Midwestern college for one unforgettably hideous semester, he was not unaccustomed to young Americans trooping through the flat, but they had mostly been graduate students preparing theses on his work.

As he shook hands with Matthew his eyes appeared to be thinking independently of the rest of his weary, loose-muscled face. He had eyelids like a doll's.

There was a pause.

'Where is maman?' Guillaume asked.

'In the kitchen,' said his father. Then, as an afterthought, 'You aren't staying in, are you?'

'Well, naturally we are, papa,' Danielle replied. 'We invited Matthew to dinner. He lives in a ghastly hotel without a range.'

The poet blinked. He did not know what a range was. He imagined it must be some kind of American Bar and Grill.

'In that case, I would advise you to go and warn your mother. There is surely insufficient for five.'

Matthew hastened to intervene. 'Please, please, you mustn't put yourselves out on my account.'

'Nonsense, my young friend. We cannot have you return to a

range-less hotel. Sit down, please. Have a cigarette,' and he plucked one from the pocket of his robe and handed it to Matthew.

'Doesn't smoke,' said Guillaume, who proceeded to shoo one of the black cats away from an armchair, to stretch his long legs sideways across one arm, to rest his head on the other, to pick up a copy of the *NRF* and to leaf through its pages.

His father smartly retrieved the cigarette and replaced it in the pocket with the others.

'Of course you don't smoke. Far too young, as I see now. Tell me, Matthew, just how old are you? Fifteen? Sixteen? Too young to be living in a hotel, don't you think?'

Embarrassed, Matthew answered, 'Nineteen.'

The poet blinked again. He looked at Matthew with suspicion now nakedly declared on his features. It was clear he believed that he was being lied to. There followed a momentary awkwardness, which was relieved by the entrance of his wife. Forewarned by Danielle, she insisted that reorganising a dinner for two so that it might serve five instead posed not the slightest problem.

The dinner was a strange, stylised and lugubrious affair. Unenthusiastically sampling the rather diluted soup, the poet at once launched into what Baudelaire, referring to Victor Hugo, described as 'that monologue that he calls a conversation'. He set out to seduce Matthew. But he was an old, hidebound roué of conversation. Whatever his public – a journalist, a graduate student, a fellow man-of-letters, a young American with whom his children happened to be acquainted – he was incapable of digressing from the script. *Il faisait son numéro*, as the French say.

'. . . *hein*, my young Matthew? For, you know, a writer's life is nothing but pretence. Make believe. Do I *write* a poem, eh? Not at all. Nothing so obvious. I *pretend* to write a poem . . . I *pretend* to write a volume of poetry. The poet (the real poet, you understand, *n'est-ce pas*) is one who only pretends to write, up to the moment, that miraculous moment, when he finds, hey presto! that a new poem has materialised in front of him, that a new book has materialised in front of him. Eh? That is why I will never comprehend the kind of writer – *le genre* Mauriac, you know – who sits down at his table at nine o'clock and rises at five. What? Are we in a profession? *Foutaises!* Or else, or else it can just be compared . . . only just, you understand . . . to the profession of the doctor. You follow what it is I'm telling you, my young American friend? That

the poet, like the doctor, will be *called* at any hour of the day or night. *L'inspiration, c'est ça.* Like a baby, it does not choose a nice seemly hour to enter the world. It has no consideration for the poet, *ça non.* But when it does come . . . then, you know . . . it's . . .' (here his voice assumed the reverence appropriate to the pathos of a creator humbled before the immemorial mystery of creation) '. . . it's magnificent. Yes, I say a doctor. That's the professional side. *Le côté professionnel, n'est-ce pas?* There is also the vocation. The vocation – there we are monks. Monks. We enter literature with our heads bowed, as a monk takes religious orders. It's really just as simple as that. The artist for whom the subject of art, the only possible subject, is art itself (and for the true artist, I tell you, there *can* be no other subject), what is he but a monk whose whole life coincides with the adoration of his God? Posterity is our Heaven. You' (he stressed the *you*) '*you* know what I mean, Matthew, don't you? The immortality of our soul. For what is an *oeuvre,* after all, but the soul of its creator? That's why I chuckle so at the antics of those pathetic old buffers in the Academy with their pretensions to institutionalised immortality. *Les Immortels,* hah! Maurois, Achard, Genevoix, Druon and that crowd! What a graveyard, Matthew, *n'est-ce pas?* For dead is what they are, not immortal, dead as writers and mummified as men, propped up in their *fauteuils* like so many old codgers in wheelchairs. What a farce! *Hein?* And, you know, it's just occurred to me, just this instant occurred to me, that real immortality, the immortality of Montaigne, of Racine, *qu'est-ce que j'en sais,* of Rimbaud, is to the so-called Immortality of the Académie Française what Heaven is to . . . well, to the Vatican. *Hein?* For that is what it is, the Academy . . . the Vatican of French literature. Yes, but yes, I see it now, the Academy and the Vatican. Doesn't the Academic green rival the Papal purple? Eh? Wouldn't you say? Ha, ha, ha! You could almost . . . And . . . And the Thursdays, you've heard of their Thursdays, *hein,* those gloriously absurd Thursdays spent grinding out the famous Dictionary? *Quelle connerie, n'est-ce pas?* Is it a French dictionary, would you say? Not at all. It's Latin, my poor young friend, Latin. The language of the Vatican. They are latinising this language of ours, *hein* . . . eh, do you follow me? . . . What?'

In his right fist, tightly clenched, Matthew was holding a small turquoise cigarette lighter, one of the disposable sort that can be bought in *tabacs* for little more than the price of a pack of cigarettes. It belonged to Danielle. He had been pensively fondling this lighter,

zigzagging it every which way over the tablecloth's chequerboard motif. And now, in the unforeseen silence that followed the poet's concluding words, words that had been addressed to him, he suddenly, jarringly, found himself the object of everyone's gaze.

Guillaume and Danielle could scarcely keep a straight face. Their stepmother turned to Matthew with just the faintest flickering of curiosity, the first to have animated her eyes all evening. The poet sedately folded his napkin in front of him and awaited an explanation.

With a premonitory tremor of panic, whose very lack as yet of any precise focal point caused it to register apocalyptically high on the Richter scale of his nervous system, Matthew looked up at his host.

'Young man, you must excuse me,' said the poet coldly, 'but I imagined I was talking to you. I also imagined you were listening. However . . .'

'Oh no, no, I was,' a stricken Matthew replied. 'The Vatican . . . absolutely. It was just . . .'

'Just what?'

'I was momentarily distracted.'

'?'

'Really, it was nothing.'

'But it must have been something. You appear to be mesmerised by this banal cigarette lighter, facsimiles of which – admittedly, in different colours – must already have swum into the ken of even one as young as yourself.'

He picked up the object, made a cursory inspection of it, then tossed it back on to the table as though he were flicking a cigarette butt between his fingers.

'Perhaps you'd agree to share your epiphany with us?'

His was the pedantic irony of the schoolmaster who has caught one of his charges day-dreaming in class.

'It isn't in the least bit interesting.'

'I will be a better judge of that.'

'Papa . . .' Danielle started to say.

'Be quiet, please. Matthew?'

'Well, sir,' Matthew began nervously, 'I was . . .'

'Yes?'

'Well, sir, I happened to take up Danielle's lighter, the way one does, you know, and I was fidgeting with it, juggling with it. Well then, I put it down on the table – on the chequered tablecloth, I should say – and it so happened that I laid it diagonally across one of these squares. Which is when I noticed that it was almost exactly the

same length as the diagonal itself. Like so' (for their benefit he performed a spontaneous demonstration). 'Then I aligned it lengthwise along the outside edge of the square and I noticed that it extended to the point where this square interlocks with that one. Like so. You see that that fits exactly, too. Then' (he picked up from the table a dinner plate on which was printed a blue willow tree pattern) 'take this plate, for instance. I'm sure . . . yes, look, I'm right' (everyone craned to see). 'The length of the lighter is also equal to the height of this little pagoda here and its width . . . its width . . . is just the width of these steps leading up to it.'

He stared at the faces surrounding him, expectant and flushed, as though he were trapped inside a well and they were peering down at him over its rim.

'It isn't the first time I've observed such . . . well, such harmony. It's rather queer, but the impression I have is that everything in the world, even this plastic cigarette lighter of Danielle's, is predicated on one small handful of measurements. I mean to say, every routine humdrum object, every *thing*, would seem to be identical in length to every other thing or exactly half or double its length. It's as though, as though there existed in the world a global – but how should I know, maybe even a *cosmic* – unity of shapes and sizes . . .'

Matthew self-consciously put the lighter on the table in front of him.

'That's what caused my mind to wander just now, sir. I'm very sorry if I interrupted your train of thought.'

The silence was ticking away like a clock. The poet frowned. For several moments he confronted Matthew with a penetrating but no longer unkindly eye. He cleared his throat, then addressed Guillaume, who was seated at his left, rocking his chair backwards with his foot.

'You have an interesting friend in this young man. More so, I suspect, than you are aware. You should take the opportunity of getting to know him better.'

Then, to the table at large, his hands, finely dappled with liver spots, splayed out before him:

'What is the time?'

Matthew, whom life without a watch had made as sensitive to the time of day as a blind man is to sounds and scents, ventured, 'Twenty-five past ten?'

It turned out to be twenty-two minutes past.

'My dear,' the poet said languidly to his wife, 'it is time you and I withdrew. I have letters to answer – letters, *n'est-ce pas*,' he added in a last gasp of his earlier febrility, 'hanging over me like unpaid bills. Stay and chat as long as you please, you three. Invite Matthew to spend the night here,' he said to Guillaume. 'That hotel sounds quite revolting.'

He stood up, and Matthew sensed that he must have been a good-looking man in his youth. But he walked with a gait so machinelike one was amazed not to see a wind-up key protruding from his back.

Remarked from afar, from the bird's eye view of fate, the chequered tablecloth resembled nothing so much as a chessboard. Fate was marshalling its pawns, plotting out its lines of attack, buttressing its defences. But such an engagement dispenses with the literalist convention, the vulgarly Manichaean stratagem, of alternating black and white squares. It can be played on a desert, on the ocean. The motif was merely a decoy, a trademark, a private joke, a declaration of intentions, a cunning *mise en abîme* for the cognoscenti.

Who was the other player? Fate was playing blindfold against itself.

Danielle was the first to speak. Lighting a third of her cigarette with the lighter in question, she said to Matthew in the voice of someone chirruping to a canary:

'Who's been hiding his light under a bushel, then?'

'Light under a bushel? What are you talking about?'

'Come, come, little man. Papa was most impressed. We can tell, *n'est-ce pas*, Guillaume? Why have you never dazzled us with these philosophical speculations of yours? Molto chic!'

'Now, Danielle,' said Matthew, gratified, all the same, that she had at last been afforded a glimpse of those inner resources of which her very presence would generally deprive him. 'I wouldn't have spoken at all had he not goaded me.'

'Papa's full of shit,' said Guillaume, picking his teeth.

'I rather liked him in the end.'

'Liked him?' Guillaume repeated incredulously. 'You mean you actually liked that silly old fart, that incontinent windbag?'

'Come on, he's a brilliant talker.'

'Is he? So what did he say?'
'What?'
'You heard me. What did he say?'
'You were there, weren't you?'
'But I want *you* to tell me.'
'Oh well, if you must know, I really don't remember too much of what he said,' Matthew admitted after a while; then added, smiling, 'But I shan't ever forget it.'
'Matthew, you're sweet,' said Danielle with a smile of her own that she transformed halfway into a yawn, 'and I'm fagged out. I'm for bed. Night-night.'
Removing her flat slip-on shoes as she made the round of the table, she kissed first Guillaume then Matthew.
'By the way,' she said, half in, half out of the door, '*are* you staying?'
'If you'll have me.'
'Goody.'

Later, Guillaume led Matthew to his room. The bed was unmade. One of his father's cats lay curled on the quilted bedspread as though to delineate, for some sentimental Montmartrois *artiste-peintre* clad in a beret and smock, the smarmily idealised essence of all felinity. An upright piano stood in a corner. The bookshelves were stuffed with film histories, genre studies, monographs of famous directors and ghosted autobiographies of Hollywood movie stars. On the walls were pinned photographs of actors and actresses: Brando leaning with cool pantherine nonchalance against a huge and bulbous motorcycle; Marilyn Monroe astride a New York subway grating, her white dress billowing up around her thighs like the petals of a fabulous orchid; Dietrich, the snowy, masklike grain of her flawless features appearing almost indivisible from that of the photograph itself. On a divan near the door were piled up dozens of copies of *Cahiers du Cinéma*.
Over Guillaume's bed, and – by virtue of having been framed by a professional frame-maker – accorded a far more elevated prominence than the other pin-ups, was a small oval portrait: Gene Tierney in a still from *Laura*.
Though he had been impatient to know this room, this shell, this sanctum sanctoria about which he had so often fantasised, Matthew felt none the less his agitation, if not at all tempered – indeed, quite the reverse – then certainly beclouded by an odd

sensation of *déjà vu*, by the obscure conviction not only that he had been there before but that something had taken place there of import to him. It took him just a moment or two to locate the source of his malaise. What were this unmade bed, these piled-up *Cahiers du Cinéma*, these pin-ups and this oval portrait but, mysteriously transposed, the unmade bed, the piled-up board games, the football pennant and the beautiful faces spread out in profile over the carpet of his best friend's bedroom in San Diego?

It was now after midnight. Plainly, Guillaume had been hoping to talk shop. He had been looking forward to discussing films late into the night, messily lounging on the bed, tickling the cat, perhaps smoking a hashish joint.

But Matthew wished to be elsewhere, alone, in his own bed, where he would be free, in slow motion, to replay the film of that day's events. So he barely responded to Guillaume's queries. Naïve actor that he was, he yawned in a conspicuously studied manner, trusting thereby that his friend would take the hint.

And at last, giving in reluctantly, Guillaume accompanied him to the flat's spare room – spare also in the sense that it had been furnished with an elegant starkness, with its polished parquet flooring, its three straight-backed chairs, its monk's narrow cot and, above the cot, precisely where the portrait of Laura hung in Guillaume's own room, a framed reproduction of Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple*.

Left to himself, Matthew lazily took his clothes off and started threading through his mind's projector the as yet unedited newsreel footage that he would screen for himself that night. Details already stood out like individual frames of a film scanned by an editor as he holds the strip of celluloid up to the light – Danielle's cardboard birthmark plopping on to the table, Watteau's *Gilles* in the Louvre, the kisses they had exchanged outside, the shell and shot of battle on the esplanade. Furiously, he tried to banish these fragments from his inner eye. He would not be satisfied with an assortment of highlights. Everything must unfold in the correct order, at the correct speed.

Absurdly, he crossed himself in front of Delacroix's *Liberté*, recited a dutiful prayer and, wearing only his underpants, climbed into bed. In the semidarkness he made out the whisper-soft flutter of the

window curtains at the other end of the room. He closed his eyes. He watched the curtains part. The film began.

Later in the night, when the newsreel had run its course, Matthew woke up. For an instant he had no notion where he was. Then he remembered. Then, as well, he was dismayed to realise that he was awake because he had to go to the lavatory and that Guillaume had forgotten to show him where it was.

He hurriedly slipped his clothes on. The corridor outside his room was a long dark tunnel, an underground stretch of lead piping in which he had been entombed.

Matthew had lost his bearings. Incapable of working out the topography of a flat that was a veritable beehive of tiny cells, he groped along the corridor. It led off into another at a right angle. The first door on the left stood ajar. Stealthily, Matthew pushed it open wider and peered inside. A bathtub, a washstand, towel racks. He switched on the light, stepped in and drew the lock behind him.

This bathroom was only a bathroom, however, not a lavatory. But months of living in a miserably underfurnished Left Bank hotel room had made going to the washstand almost instinctive for Matthew. He turned the cold tap on, raised himself on tiptoe and urinated into the basin.

Back in the corridor he retraced his steps. The air in the house seemed to have turned to stone. Straight ahead was a doorway underlined by a filament of light. He padded soundlessly towards it. Then, taking a final glance at the corridor, he opened the door.

It was Guillaume's room, not his own. A blue bedside lamp had been left on to throw a pallid spotlight over the bed. What did he see? Guillaume and Danielle.

Danielle was a Balthus. Sprawled out on the bed asleep, half under the covers, half on top, her whole body yawning, askew in a pose of rapturous lassitude, her lovely dishevelled head cast back on its pillow, a wisp of hair grazing her lips, the black cat nuzzling wantonly in the folds of her crotch, as though she had it clamped between her thighs, she was wearing a plain white vest and white panties. She looked about fourteen years old.

Beside her, Guillaume lay naked. He, too, slept with one leg under the covers, one leg free, like Harlequin in parti-coloured pantaloons, the right leg dark, the left one light. His ankle dangled over the end

of the bed. He was asleep on his back, his head resting on the palms of his hands, like someone stretched out in a field, so that two becurled shadows were visible in the open cups of his armpits. The third shadow, that which in the human body forms the apex of an inverted triangle, was hidden by the bedclothes just where his exposed thigh emerged from beneath them.

What made them such an extraordinary sight was that the limbs of one seemed also to belong to the other.

For a long time Matthew remained stock still on the threshold of the room, transfixed not by the entanglement of bodies in a motor accident but by the enigma of the Androgyne.

Then at last he softly closed the door and tiptoed away.

SECOND PART

Paris–Normandy

March, April, 1968

When matthew opened his eyes next morning after a fretful night, it was to see Danielle, as though ready to pounce, crouched on his bedclothes, on all fours, peering absorbedly into his face. Over her shoulders she had flung an old-fashioned woollen dressing gown of an ugly dark maroon hue, with, on its sleeves and lapels, corded braiding as convoluted as the knots that loop the loop on the uniforms of operetta hussars. Only a flash of pastel pale thigh intimated that, beneath the robe, she was still wearing the plain white vest and panties of the night before.

Matthew suffered in the mornings from a mild form of double vision. If he was now able to withhold what would have been natural surprise at finding Danielle's face so near to his, it was because she appeared at first to his filmy-eyed gaze as belonging still to one of his dreams. He had no idea how long she had been crouching in front of him. Nor did she give him any time to put the question to her, for she immediately raised her forefinger to her lips and, in a voice as imperious as a hypnotist's, whispered:

'Be still. Do not speak. I command it.'

Her tongue protruding over her lower lip, her hand unshaking, half schoolboy and half surgeon, Danielle inserted her finger into the soft crevice at the corner of his left eye and slowly, avidly, meticulously, excavated the tiny, brittle stalactite of sleep that was lodged there. After subjecting it to a thorough examination on the tip of her finger, she flicked it off, then proceeded to draw a similarly scabby, yellowish fragment from the right one. These two nocturnal incrustations looked absolutely minute on her finger but felt, from Matthew's own point of view, like a pair of dice that had been extracted from his eyes.

When this operation was complete she gracefully slid back into a sitting posture and greeted him:

'Good morning!'

Matthew eased himself up on to his pillow. He went on shielding himself with the bedclothes as he was wearing only his underpants.

'Danielle, what on earth was that about?'

'Why, my little Matthew,' she brightly replied, 'I was removing the sleep from your eyes, of course! You have beautiful eyes, you know. Guillaume lets me do his every morning, but with great brown blinkers like yours around I wasn't going to pass up the chance of a second helping.'

'But . . . but what an extraordinary thing to want to do.'

'You think so?' said Danielle, leaping to the floor. 'Didn't you enjoy it?'

'Was I supposed to?'

'What else?' she answered. Then:

'Will you get up now, lazybones, the house is alive and awaits Monsieur's pleasure.'

Manoeuvring the train of her robe like a woman in an evening gown mounting the staircase at the Opéra, she continued to linger in the room – aligning a lopsided painting, deciphering the inscription engraved on a silver christening mug, picking up objects at random and weighing them in her two hands – as though magically rediscovering some long unvisited haunt of her childhood years.

Matthew did not move a muscle. He watched her, fascinated, from under the covers.

Finally, she turned to face him directly. 'Well, what are you waiting for? Haven't I told you – requested you, rather, in terms of exceptional graciousness – to get up?'

'Danielle, please, I'm undressed.'

She smiled at him, raised her eyebrows as though to say 'So what?' and went on gliding about the room. Whereupon, in a quite seamless fashion, the natural rhythms and easy, haphazard elegance of her carriage began to flower into something more choreographed, even balletic, as she flitted from the bed to one of the straight-backed chairs, from the chair to a ponderous Biedermeier chest-of-drawers, from the chest-of-drawers to Delacroix's *Liberté*, dusting each of them lightly with her fingertips or else lovingly stroking them along the palms of her hands.

Suddenly, at the height of this gala performance, she fired a question at Matthew:

'Who in what film?'

Without a second's hesitation Matthew answered, 'Garbo in *Queen Christina*. The scene where she bids farewell to the room in which she made love to John Gilbert.'

'In the future, in my memory, I shall live a great deal in this room,' croaked Danielle, mimicking with uncanny accuracy the voice of

the Swedish actress. Then, high-kicking a bare leg behind her, from underneath the trailing robe, she opened the bedroom door and called back to him:

'The bathroom's at the end of the corridor, then first on the left. We have a private wing to ourselves here, you know. And if you aren't in Guillaume's room in precisely five minutes, we're coming to get you.'

The door slammed shut.

Matthew had awoken into a state of semi-conscious malaise, which Danielle's intrusion had not allowed him to identify. Now he traced it to its source. She had just remarked that she and Guillaume had 'a private wing to ourselves'. Did she mean a wing of the flat? Could that be why brother and sister slept together in perfect impunity, a Romeo and Juliet star-crossed because they belonged not to two warring families but to a single one? But then, could it not simply have been solace that Danielle had been seeking in her brother's arms, solace from loneliness or insomnia? Could he not possibly have mistaken her ecstatic demeanour, her body cast every which way over the bed, her hands, her feet, those lovely far-flung extremities of hers, that were, like the stars of a constellation as depicted on an astrological chart, connected each to each by milky white limbs in disarray?

Such questions rang inside his head like a telephone bell. He let them ring. He could answer none of them. He started to put his clothes on.

In the bathroom he found Guillaume and Danielle. They were both in their underclothes; Guillaume was shaving with an electric razor, while Danielle sat on the edge of the bathtub clipping her toenails.

Without turning his head Guillaume greeted Matthew's reflection in the shaving mirror. He gave him a tube of toothpaste. He asked if he minded brushing his teeth with his finger. Both Danielle and he were particular about sharing toothbrushes.

Cleanliness is next to godliness as a swimming-pool may be erected next door to a church. It is not the same thing. Innocuous as this little vignette was, it filled Matthew's nostrils with the ambiguous aromas of a swimming-pool he had once known.

*

Formerly he had frequented swimming-pools, and eventually developed into a better, faster, stronger swimmer than either he or anyone else could have predicted for one so frail.

It was not really the pool itself to which he had felt drawn, though he liked to watch its youthful, virile divers, like those charming statues that earn their living as caryatids or fountains, plunge into the water with the heavy grace of torpedoes then furiously set about cutting it into strips like so many pairs of scissors.

Rather, it was what took place backstage, as it were, that had excited his scarcely developed senses. There, with a sickening jolt, he had discovered a phosphorescence, an iridescence, an irresistible mixture of cleanliness and dirt, an intoxicating cocktail of soap and sperm and sweat, in which lithe young men, millionaires of beauty, dandies of nudity, gold medallists in vigour, poise and assurance, strolled to and fro among squalid little cubicles, exhibiting their bodies like mannequins, in the poses of mannequins, in the pose of Botticelli's Venus or of Miss O'Murphy in Boucher's painting, on the rosy cheeks of whose bottom one would so like to lay a resounding slap.

Furthermore, it was not unusual to catch, half-glimpsed, cross-legged in some sinister alcove, his carelessly draped towel revealing just the skylight of his body, an adolescent Narcissus, *in flagrante delicto* with himself, his pose and grimaces making one think of nothing so much as a Samurai at the height of hara-kiri.

'Here. Use this.'

Guillaume was pressing the electric razor into his hands. For a moment Matthew was uncertain how to respond; and it was by hesitating in this way, even though very briefly, that he forfeited his chance to dissemble. All at once Guillaume scrutinised his pale, shy features, the features of a housebroken mama's boy, as intently as his father had done the evening before.

'*Don't* you use a razor?'

Danielle slid off the bathtub and also approached.

These two white vests, these two pairs of white underpants, one of them swollen by a tight, suggestive bulge, the other under-shadowed by the dark silhouette of a triangular mound – nothing was more calculated to arouse him, to thrill him to the core, and at the same time to alarm him.

He backed off, only to be pinioned against the door, on which were hanging up assorted dressing gowns and bathrobes.

'You *don't* shave!' said Guillaume in his mockingly disbelieving voice.

'Oh, do let's *see*,' Danielle squealed; but when she extended her hand to caress Matthew's cheek, he held her off at arm's length.

'Stop it, leave me alone.'

Brother and sister retreated. They had grown accustomed to his docile submission to their banter and their teasing. They imagined that he had long since become immune to it, as they themselves were immune to the boisterous give-and-take of their own mutual raillery. It startled them, in such an enclosed space, to confront his huge, hurt eyes, which seemed to devour his face, devour the tiny, cramped bathroom, crane against walls and ceiling, obscure lintels and cornices, like an outsize apple by Magritte.

'All right. I don't shave yet,' he answered sulkily. 'What of it?'

'Nothing, nothing,' murmured Danielle, smirkingly contrite.

'My father was exactly the same,' he went on. 'He didn't have to shave till he was in his twenties. It's not so very uncommon.'

'Of course, of course it's not. It's just . . .'

'What?' Matthew's eyes narrowed.

'*So* unusual for an Italian, surely,' said Danielle, who pretended to suppress a fit of giggles. 'More typical, I'd say, of a Mexican.'

'A Mexican?'

'A Mexican Hairless, that is.'

'Blast you, Danielle!'

'What's interesting about a Mexican Hairless, you know,' she rattled on, 'is that it isn't hairless at all – anyway, not entirely. Putting it discreetly, it has hair where people have hair. Now the question is, Matthew, have you?'

'What?'

'Have you hair . . . there?'

With not a shred of embarrassment, she indicated the spot on her own body. The candour of her gesture was such that there could be no ambiguity about its meaning.

Love is blind, but not deaf.

Matthew felt his lower lip tremble. In a moment or two, he knew himself too well, it would have dissolved into a nerveless, blubbery pat of redcurrent jelly. His mouth still awash with toothpaste and water, he abruptly left them.

Marching along the corridor back to his room, he could hear a muffled quarrel erupt between Guillaume and Danielle. The

bathroom door slammed. Then Guillaume, out of breath, still dressed only in his underclothes, rubbing his chin with a towel whose edging was a Greek motif, caught up with him.

'Don't take it so seriously, *mon vieux*,' he said, sliding his arm around Matthew's shoulders. 'You know that Danielle likes teasing. It really doesn't mean anything. She teases you because she's fond of you.'

'Too late. I'm leaving at once.'

'What, leaving? Rubbish. You haven't had your breakfast yet. Besides, we were going to invite you to stay on. The parents are off tomorrow (they have a house in the Var) and Danielle and I thought you'd prefer to move your things here. You don't have to return to that beastly room of yours, do you? You haven't paid up in advance or anything of that sort? Well, then, say yes. Danielle would be fearfully let down if you didn't. We talked it over last night.'

That was a slip of the tongue. Since, on the evening before, Danielle had got up from the table first and disappeared, they should not by rights have been able to communicate with each other until morning.

But Matthew's mind had begun to dwell on arguments less petty and more potent.

He had been offered privileged access to a secret world, a world from which he had heretofore been excluded, a planet achingly distant from the solar system of average, upright citizens, who, like mediaeval astronomers, tended to confuse that solar system with the universe itself. It was a world of which he had known practically nothing a mere twenty-four hours earlier. Its inhabitants he had frequented only tangentially, whenever it had taken their fancy, like Caliphs or angels, to roam incognito through the ordinary world – strewn with identity cards, tax returns and bank statements – of those average, upright citizens.

World, planet, universe: these are conceits of physicists and Vernian dreamers. This planet, orbiting as it did around the place de l'Odéon, existed for Matthew in far more concrete and earthy terms. It already boasted entangled legs, unmade beds, a communal bathroom, warm, moist, dewy-windowed and redolent of suspect odours, as well as other mysteries that remained as yet unveiled but might conceivably be made accessible in their turn.

To take up residence in the flat, however temporary, would be a mistake: of that he had every reason to be aware. Not to take up

residence would be no less of a mistake. The thing was to make the right mistake, not the wrong one.

When Danielle came, with apparent sincerity, to apologise for her callousness and grace his forehead with a prim, sisterly kiss, Matthew said yes. They would collect his belongings from the hotel room later that day.

It transpired that the flat did after all contain a wing of sorts, one inhabited exclusively by the young people. It even had a name: *le quartier des enfants*. On his way to the kitchen, Matthew realised how far from the centre of the household their bedrooms were.

That morning the poet was nowhere to be seen. His wife, bowed over the kitchen table, on which was spread out *Le Figaro*, mumbled a greeting to her stepchildren and their guest, apathetically gathered up the newspaper and excused herself. She was a poor cousin in her own house.

They sat with their elbows on the table, drinking coffee from bowls which they held in both hands and in which they dunked thick *tartines* buttered by Guillaume.

Matthew, of too fragile a constitution to have been packed off to summer camp as a child, had actually never known the experience of breakfasting with someone outside his own family circle. So he was resolved to preserve the memory of that first morning as, in its pristine state, unwrinkled by projection, one preserves the negative of a film. His resolve, however, ended by investing each and every one of his gestures with an unwarranted solemnity. Like Garbo as Queen Christina, he felt he was touching that coffee bowl, that spoon, that sugar shaker, for the last rather than the first time.

It rained all day, and the three friends stayed indoors. As before, there seemed to exist a complicit agreement that neither Langlois nor the Cinémathèque be mentioned. The poet, having withdrawn early to his study to tend his inspiration, manifested no further interest in Matthew's welfare.

Guillaume and Matthew spent most of the day lounging about the drawing room as bonelessly as the cats whose backs they felt being rubbed against their legs. They chatted, they devised movie quizzes with which to test each other's memory, they brought Guillaume's albums up to date.

Danielle, for her part, had no truck with their infantile pastimes.

She read, voraciously turning the pages of her novel as though the foot of each page heralded some stunning reversal or revelation that would only be divulged at the top of the next one. From time to time she would uncoil her angular limbs, crank up the phonograph and set its needle down on a record, invariably the same scratchy song, Charles Trenet's 'Que reste-t-il de nos amours?', to which she was addicted.

After the eighth or ninth playing, its lyrics had been seared into Matthew's brain:

'Ce soir le vent qui frappe à ma porte
Me parle des amours mortes
Devant le feu qui s'éteint.
Ce soir c'est une chanson d'automne
Devant la maison qui frissonne
Et je pense aux jours lointains.

'Que reste-t-il de nos amours?
Que reste-t-il de ces bons jours?
Une photo, vieille photo
De ma jeunesse.

'Que reste-t-il des billets-doux,
Des mois d'avril, des rendezvous?
Un souvenir qui me poursuit
Sans cesse.

'Bonheurs fanés, cheveux aux vents,
Baisers volés, rêves mouvants,
Que reste-t-il de tout cela?
Dîtes-le-moi.

'Un p'tit village, un vieux clocher,
Un paysage si bien caché,
Et dans un nuage le cher visage
De mon passé.'

When Danielle bestirred herself to play it for the tenth time, her brother glared up at her.

'If you play that fucking record once more, I swear I'm going to smash it over your head.'

'What?' replied Danielle, her eyes open wide in amazement. 'I thought you liked Charles Trenet?'

'Not a dozen times in a row I don't.'

'When *I* like something,' she announced piously, 'then it's to the point of saturation.'

'That point has been reached. Now stow it.'

'Listen to him, Matthew, he who's seen *Laura* eighteen times – eighteen times, can you imagine? *He* orders me to stop listening to one little record. Well, I won't.'

She walked over to the phonograph, started to wind it up, whistling like some character in a comedy film who tries to feign nonchalant unflappability, and set the needle down on the record.

After the statutory crackly hiss, as though he were clearing his throat, Trenet's voice rang out:

'Ce soir le vent qui frappe à ma porte
Me parle des amours mortes
Devant le feu qui s'éteint . . .'

As Guillaume galvanised into life his long, lazy frame and advanced towards the Loïe Fuller arabesques, Danielle installed herself in front of the phonograph to shield it from the encroaching vandal. A clash of arms appeared inevitable. Then:

'Que reste-t-il des billets-doux,
Des mois d'avril, des rendezvous?
Un souvenir qui me poursuit . . .
Un souvenir qui me poursuit . . .
Un souvenir qui me poursuit . . .'

The needle had stuck. The accident, far from appeasing Guillaume's rage, fuelled it instead. Danielle, striving to push him away with her fists, protested in a high, girlish shriek:

'No, no! Stop, don't do it! Wait! Matthew, Matthew, tell me . . . what film?'

'What do you mean, what film?'

Danielle, still fending off Guillaume: 'What film . . . No, name a film in which . . . in which a needle is stuck in a record. Quick! Forfeit to pay if you can't answer.'

Urged on by Danielle, Matthew racked his memory.

'Quick, quick, else you'll pay a forfeit!'

Finally he trumpeted, '*Top Hat*!'

'*Top Hat*?'

'Don't you remember? Fred Astaire is tap-dancing in his hotel room above Ginger Rogers' suite and the record gets stuck.'

Danielle reflected for a second or two, attempting to summon up a mental image of the scene. 'I can't quite visualise . . .'

'He's right,' said Guillaume, who was forgetting by now what had prompted him to his feet.

'Then bravo, my little Matthew!' Danielle cried.

'But, Danielle, what would the forfeit have been?'

'Ah,' said she mysteriously, 'that would be telling.'

And that was how the game began.

Danielle, for whom everything had to be accorded a name, even things that have no names, christened it Home Movies. The idea was this. The young people would be calmly going about their business, whether together or separately, reading, playing chess or Monopoly in front of a blazing fire, assigning stars to the films listed in *Pariscope* (it tended to be the most humdrum of occupations), when one of them, besieged, spontaneously and without premeditation, by a vague sensation of *déjà vu*, would brusquely come to a halt, reiterate the little snippet of *mise en scène* for the benefit of the other two and call out 'What film?' or 'Which scene?' or 'Name a character who . . .'

Later that same day, for instance, sorting out newspaper cuttings that he had been pointlessly accumulating for years, Guillaume placed a glass paperweight on top of them. This paperweight was of the type which, when inverted, produces a miniature snowstorm. With a reckless sweep of his shoulders he knocked it over on the carpet. Without even giving him an opportunity to pose the prescribed question, Matthew and Danielle simultaneously cried out, '*Citizen Kane*!'

That was too easy. But, with time, the game became more and more difficult. On another day, in the kitchen, this exchange could be heard between Matthew and Guillaume:

'Guillaume, I wonder –'

'Matthew, would you –'

A pause, then:

'Go ahea–'

'Sorry. What was –'

A further pause.

'I just want –'

'I meant to –'

It was then that Matthew pounced.

'Name a film!'

'Eh?'

'Come on, Guillaume. Name a film, just one film, in which two characters keep trying to speak at the same time.'

What ensued were mingled protestations of 'Shush! Don't tell me, don't tell me!' and 'Time's up! Forfeit!' – until Guillaume either named a title or paid his forfeit.

The notion of forfeits, instituted by that chance remark of Danielle's when the game was first introduced, had, to start with, a purely monetary basis. A franc, two francs or else fifty centimes, depending on the victim's resources or the victor's whim.

However, they would rapidly grow bored with such trifling prizes, which, in truth, as their meagre funds were soon to be pooled in what Danielle was to call their 'community chest', of which she also appointed herself the treasurer, would hardly represent a gain.

No, just as a hierarchy of trials, ordeals and challenges would gradually transform this game, that had begun so harmlessly in childish pranks and giggles, into a sacrament and a liturgy, so, in their turn, would its forfeits acquire an entirely new significance.

Let us go back to the first afternoon. The rain having steadied to a sparse, continuous drizzle, Guillaume and Matthew left the flat at five o'clock. Guillaume's *mobylette* stood padlocked and chained at the foot of the stairs in the apartment building's sordid hallway. The plan was that he would ride to the Casbah with Matthew on the pillion seat, deposit his passenger in front of his hotel and return home, leaving Matthew to pack his bags and make his own way back to the flat in a taxi. But there would be a detour in his itinerary that he had not dared to divulge to Danielle, for he intended also to take a turn round the XVIth Arrondissement to determine whether the Cinémathèque, by some happy chance, had reopened its doors. Fearing his sister's viperish tongue, he swore Matthew to secrecy on pain of torture.

Yet someone who entreats you not to divulge a confidence will almost certainly contrive to blurt it out again before you do. So it proved here; so quickly, indeed, that by the time Matthew re-entered the *quartier des enfants*, Danielle was already privy to a secret that not even the rack would have drawn from his lips. Need it be said, the *Fermé* sign was still attached to the Cinémathèque grille.

Matthew, too, had his secret. It was Tuesday, the day on which he

was accustomed to go to confession. So, after leaving Guillaume, he walked off in the opposite direction from his hotel, its name imprinted vertically against the Paris skyline in neon lettering, and took the Métro to the avenue Hoche.

There, in the English church, he confessed to a dozing priest – it was, he guessed from the dull porcine sonority of his snores, the elderly Irishman Father Murphy. In a niche that directly faced the confessional stood a plaster Madonna with a globe of the world clutched in her two hands over the sculpted folds of her robe like a basketball. Her pale head was tilted chastely to one side. Her halo, ringed by a garland of stars, resembled an electric fan in motion. Her glazed, unfocusing eyes were open but looked closed, as though false pupils had been delicately traced on the surface of her eyelids. She bore, in the church's candlelit glimmer, a disquieting resemblance to Falconetti, Dreyer's Joan of the Arc-Lights.

Matthew knelt before her. His heart beating, he silently prayed for something that is not generally regarded as proper to pray for, something that, if it came to pass, he would afterwards be compelled to confess and repent.

In vain he struggled with himself not to articulate, even wordlessly, his blasphemous appeal. Alas, the trouble with the flesh is not that it is weak but that it is strong.

In fact, the Virgin heard his prayer. And even if her painted eyes did not shed any tears, Matthew's eyes did – which, these days, is itself a kind of miracle.

He stumbled out of the church, edging furtively along its walls. Back at the hotel he stuffed his few belongings into two leather suitcases and a red TWA flight bag. Then he paid his bill and had the receptionist ring for a taxi.

His taxi stopped at traffic lights near the carrefour de l'Odéon. Matthew glanced out of the window. Inside a bus-stop shelter stood a young couple carrying under their arms large art school folders with speckled blue-green covers. The boy had a sultry, rather exotic complexion; the girl's long straight sandy brown hair framed her symmetrical face in the manner of a nun's wimple. Oblivious of the crowds swarming into the Métro and queueing up to enter the Publicis cinema, oblivious, too, of the imminent arrival of the bus they were perhaps waiting for, they neither kissed nor embraced but simply stood gazing into each other's eyes.

Matthew had time to observe one charming detail. Curling his

companion's pinkie around his own, the boy held it up for inspection as though admiring a signet ring.

Matthew looked away again. The lights turned to green and the taxi drove off.

That evening he dined with Guillaume and Danielle in one of the sea food *brasseries* on the place Bienvenue in Montparnasse. It was his treat for having been invited to stay at the flat. They ordered a colossal platter of oysters, mussels, crayfish, shrimps, whelks, crabs and spiny lobsters, nestling on a bed of crushed ice and strands of seaweed the colour, texture and smell of a fisherman's oilcloth sou'wester. Noisily plying hammers and pincers and tongs, they left the plate as devastated as an archaeological dig.

It was a few minutes after midnight when they got back home. The cats were prowling through the unlighted rooms. The poet and his wife had retired for the night. Their plan was to set forth for the Var at the crack of dawn.

Not infrequently, and invariably when on the point of beginning or ending one of his books, the poet had chosen in this way to decamp to the restorative warmth and feather-duster palms of the Var. And though, on the occasion of earlier trips, when his children *were* children, his wife had remained in Paris, her anodyne presence was now requested at his side, should ever, as at some eternal twenty-past or twenty-to the inspirational hour, the capricious guardian angel of his Muse decline to alight on the virgin page.

She was his tranquilliser, his Valium.

The children, he had insisted, could be trusted on their own. They were intelligent, mature beings. Besides which, there was his wife's sister, a maiden lady in her early sixties, to ensure that all was as it should be.

Time and time again, moreover, he would be proved right. He and his wife would arrive back one evening to find the flat in shipshape order, his offspring quietly and conscientiously engaged on their homework, translating Virgil or working out some absurd mathematical puzzler involving pipes, wash basins and dripping taps.

Unguessed, undreamt of, was the metamorphosis that the flat and its occupants had meanwhile undergone. For each such departure of their parents would leave the two young people *to their own*

devices. Many, various and wonderful were these devices; and both Guillaume and Danielle, at least since their adolescence, had fully availed themselves of the physical and spiritual freedom so freely vouchsafed them. Like gamblers who, deprived of their cards or dice, will bet on car registration numbers, on the speed at which raindrops slither down a window pane, on anything at all, they needed nothing but a mutual, unconditionally offered complicity to descend to their private shades.

Venturing into the world at large, they would dip their lights as a car will dip its yellow headlamps when encountering another along a misty nocturnal highway; thereafter, when once the door to the world had been closed behind them, these same lights would blaze out brightly, blinding the naked eye.

What was to happen, then, was not a new occurrence; and if their folly this time would be even more unremittingly intense, it was perhaps that, in Matthew, they had at last found a child for their incestuous cradle.

For a few days, though, the course of their communal existence ran uneventfully enough. Every morning, in the kitchen, they breakfasted together on cold cereal, undaunted by the tough little fragments of dried cornflakes with which the sides of their unrinsed bowls were soon to become encrusted. Then Danielle would accompany her brother on his *mobylette* to the *lycée* that both of them attended, while Matthew took the Métro to his film school in the suburbs. And every evening, on returning, shedding overcoats, jackets and scarves in disarray over the hallway floor, they withdrew into the *quartier des enfants* and gave themselves up to the increasingly compulsive question-and-answer sessions of Home Movies, for which they had now started to keep a score.

These were blissful days for Matthew, who would sometimes, on his way back from film school, travel by Métro no further than Vavin or Denfert-Rochereau then, with a springing step, walk the remaining distance to the flat, titillating himself with the prospect of spending yet another evening in the company of his beloved mentors and tormentors.

But, inevitably, things could not last too long as they were. For this is how a drug of any kind works, ensnaring its victim with the finesse

of a card sharper, permitting the future addict to win a few hands before moving in for the kill.

Guillaume and Danielle were born addicts, to whose unfathomable cravings the cinema and each other were the sole opiates ever to have presented themselves. And Matthew – who, had he never left San Diego, would doubtless have ended by marrying one or other of his childhood sweethearts, some sexily winsome flirt, all patience, gratitude and smiles – Matthew had once and for all, as he had both dreaded and desired, pledged himself to their unstable fortunes.

The first phase of Home Movies, that which could be regarded as its prehistory, was therefore of fairly short duration.

It was not long before Danielle, exasperated by having to wait for an opportunity to strike more or less unbidden, decided to force the issue.

One afternoon, wearing white overalls, an improvised white turban and a pair of white-rimmed dark glasses, like some nineteen-thirties Hollywood actress snapped in a relaxed pose on the veranda of her Bel Air mansion, she happened to look into Guillaume's bedroom where he and Matthew were reading aloud to each other from back numbers of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Her beady eyes instantly registered the mounting clutter of books, magazines, underclothes, half-consumed sandwiches and peanut shells. Smiling slyly to herself, she took a cigarette, one she had already trisected; but, before inserting it into her holder, she started tapping one end of it against the side of the pack with a kind of clipped, staccato violence. Then, ostentatiously puffing on the cigarette, omitting to inhale between puffs, chewing the remark in the corner of her mouth as though it were a wad of bubble gum, she spat out:

'What a dump!'

Guillaume, without raising his eyes from the page he was reading, mechanically called back, 'Elizabeth Taylor in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*'

Danielle beamed in triumph.

'Wrong!'

'The hell I'm wrong,' cried Guillaume. 'In the opening scene, Elizabeth Taylor . . .' He broke off, suddenly realising his mistake. 'Oh Lord, no, of course. She's imitating Bette Davis, isn't she? In . . .'

'In what, brother dear?'

Guillaume implored her to provide him with a clue, the merest hint of a hint, the director's name, the number of words in the title,

the first letter of the first word – anything that might cause it to come unstuck from the tip of his tongue.

Danielle, naturally, stood her ground. She swore Matthew to silence. Had the Sphinx given Oedipus a clue to the riddle it posed him?

Guillaume was at last forced to concede defeat.

'*Beyond the Forest*,' said Danielle. 'Directed by King Vidor *circa* 1950.' Then:

'Forfeit.'

'How much?'

'Not this time,' she replied as though she were still imitating Bette Davis. 'This time I would like to be paid in kind.'

'How do you mean, paid in kind?'

Danielle lowered her dark glasses down the bridge of her nose and peered at him over the rims.

She coolly spelt out her design. 'I dare you to do now what I've watched you do, without your knowing that I saw you, in front of *her*.' She took the glasses off altogether and waved them in the direction of the oval portrait of Gene Tierney.

This mystifying request – mystifying, that is, to Matthew, who could none the less sense the hovering play of strange new shadows about the room, shadows self-generating, with no real substance as yet – was met with a silence so intense and absolute it was more than capable of holding its own amidst all manner of extraneous, earthbound sounds. In vain Trenet's voice attempted to interrupt it:

'Ce soir c'est une chanson d'automne
Devant la maison qui frissonne
Et je pense aux jours lointains.

'Que reste-t-il de nos amours?
Que reste-t-il de ces bons jours?
Une photo, vieille photo
Da ma jeunesse.

'Que reste-t-il des billets-doux,
Des mois d'avril, des rendezvous?'

Casting a glance at Matthew, Guillaume then turned to his sister with a hard ball of sullenness in his mouth.

'I'm sure I've no idea what you're talking about.'

'And I'm sure you have, my pet,' Danielle continued suavely. 'Only, *voilà*, you didn't know I knew. The afternoons when you come home from school and bolt your door and the bedsprings start to jangle and creak – good grief, do you fancy I'm too thick to guess what must be going on? Besides, your keyhole is directly opposite the bed and one couldn't ask for a more appropriate frame for the sort of filthiness you've been getting up to.'

'Bonheurs fanés, cheveux aux vents,
Baisers volés, rêves mouvants,
Que reste-t-il de tout cela?
Dîtes-le-moi.

'Un p'tit village, un vieux clocher . . .'

'Forfeit,' Danielle repeated calmly.

'I won't do it.'

'Won't do it? Scared?'

'*You* wouldn't.'

Danielle grinned. Looking at Gene Tierney, she remarked, 'No, I wouldn't. But then, she isn't my type. Otherwise . . .'

'What a bitch you are, a bitch and a sadist.'

'Oh, you know, I've always wanted to live in the rue de Sade. *120 Rue de Sade*: now wouldn't that make a delightful letterhead?' She yawned. 'However. The question is, Guillaume, are you going to pay the forfeit or chicken out – which, you realise, will mean the end of the game?'

Guillaume sat thoughtfully for a moment or two. His eyes took in each of them in turn: Danielle, Matthew, the oval portrait. Then he faced his sister again.

'Very well, Danielle, very well. The game must go on.'

He spoke in the voice of an actor who receives a fateful telegram just as the curtain is about to rise on some smart drawing-room comedy.

Matthew had never found himself closer to detesting Danielle than at this moment. He detested her for having exacted from Guillaume, from his friend, a humiliating covenant of whose precise nature he remained as yet in ignorance but which had already evoked uneasy memories of the puerile indignities inflicted on each

other by schoolboys in recreation grounds or leering Boy Scouts in tents pitched in lonely glades.

Yet we are most merciless when we discover our own baseness, our own wretched hypocrisies, reflected in another's; and the dread that was sweeping over him, a dread now encompassing not only Guillaume's but his own future on this island, this planet, this first-floor flat just off the place de l'Odéon, was at the same time bound up with an almost uncontrollable exhilaration.

Guillaume stood up. Turning sideways away from Matthew, he started to draw his sweater over his head.

'Ah, no,' said his sister, tightening the screw. 'Matthew is part of the forfeit, if you please.'

This time Guillaume only shrugged. He defiantly confronted both Matthew and Danielle. Quickly unbuttoning his shirt, he drew it back over his shoulder-blades. His chest was hairless except for a single dark wisp that sprang from his navel like a mountain stream before plunging underground once more beneath his trouser belt. Unbuckling the belt, he let his corduroy jeans crumple to his feet. Then, bending forward, raising one leg after the other, he jerked them free.

Whereupon, to Matthew's astonishment, Danielle clapped her hands over her eyes and screamed, 'No, no! Not that, anything but that!'

Was she having second thoughts? Had she realised that Guillaume was outsmarting her by calling her bluff?

Hardly. For, peeking gingerly through her interlocked fingers as through two slats in a Venetian blind, she shuddered:

'How often have I told you never, *never* to take your trousers off before your socks! Look at yourself, you half-wit, you've got navy blue socks on. They give you that ghastly sawn-off appearance when you're naked. Pull them off at once!'

Treating his sister to a monumental scowl, Guillaume removed the offending pair of socks. Then, after a nearly imperceptible pause, he took off his white underpants, rolling rather than drawing them over his sexual organs the way a woman will roll back a nylon stocking before inserting her foot in its sheath and gracefully smoothing it out along her leg with the flat of her hand. When he flipped them about his ankles, they already appeared as lifelessly wrinkled on the floor as an animal's dead skin.

He stood before them, his knees together, shivering slightly, like some arrowless Sebastian.

Now that he had emerged from the grubby chrysalis of his own

clothes, the transformation was as thorough and as startling as with those ragged street urchins of Fez or Tangiers who, on the beach, moult into the gorgeous finery of their natural condition.

But there is an eighth veil, the one that conceals the soul. It was this veil that Danielle was fiercely determined to see removed, it was there that, if sadist she were, her sadism truly began.

Her brother stood for a few seconds mutely contemplating his penis. It was almost erect; or rather, neither erect nor limp but in a half-tumescent state and just about to levitate like the fakir's Indian rope. His testicles were as heavy as gourds.

He knelt on his bed, beneath the oval portrait. His eyes already captivated by the imperturbable mask of embalmed loveliness with which the actress requited their gaze, he began massaging his penis into shape as though it were a huge pink wax earplug. Faster and faster went his hand, instinctively rediscovering its familiar and immemorial pulsation, a pulsation that soon accelerated, raced ahead of him, spiralled out of his hand's authority, paced by the rhythmic clangour of the bedsprings that reverberated through the room like the pistons of an express train carrying him closer and closer to his goal. It was almost as though his now erect and livid member controlled the movements of his hand, not vice versa, as though he would not have been capable of removing his fingers from it even had he wished to, the way one's fingers seem for a single frightful instant to be stuck fast to the scalding handle of a saucepan that one has picked up unthinkingly. And when the moment of crisis arrived, the jet of pearly white sperm that he discharged, sperm glistening, or so it appeared to Matthew's eyes, with tiny scintillae of light, arched upward towards the oval portrait, straining forward as though to its preordained objective, where for a split second it seemed to hover, suspended, arrested in flight, like a fountain that all of a sudden freezes over in mid-air, producing, at the snap of one's fingers against the sparkling little pinnacle of ice that it has become, a high, pure, silvery musical note.

It was an impression that lasted no more than a fraction of a second, was even unconscious, subliminal. For, an instant later, all was damp stickiness, matted hair on the thighs and the faint, sweetish odour of fish paste.

Guillaume lay on the bed, panting, spent, propped on one side, his

hands aligned along the ridge of his back and hips, in the posture of an opium smoker. In the bird's nest of his crotch the mother bird once more placidly nursed her two eggs.

Positioned against the window, Danielle was agitated in spite of herself. Her voyeurism was of a subtle order. She liked to spy on voyeurs. Behind her dark glasses, while Guillaume had been masturbating, her eyes had nervously darted to and fro, from her brother to Matthew and back again.

Now, the demonstration at its end, those eyes had become indecipherable. Only a soft flutter of eyelashes, as of moths in the night, could be discerned beyond their shades.

As for Matthew, who had watched without saying a word, his body could no more lie about his feelings than he himself could. His cheeks were inflamed, his hands shook, his crotch felt like a clenched fist between his thighs. He wondered how he could ever face Guillaume again.

Most unexpectedly, however, from this abrupt raising of the stakes there followed a truce, an armistice, one that was to see them through the next two days. Whether because nothing that any of them seemed to do would conjure up a matching gesture in some classic film or, and this was far more likely, because it impressed both Matthew and Danielle as equally unimaginable either to advance or to retreat, the rallying cry of 'What film?' or 'Name a film' ceased for a time to echo through the flat.

Danielle kept her own counsel, and busied herself with all manner of mundane chores. But Matthew knew that the matter could not end, had not ended, there. To be sure, Guillaume had clothed himself again without fuss, and he had subsequently acted as though nothing had occurred to occasion the least change of heart. But it was precisely because, for Matthew, something, or everything, had permanently changed that his friend's almost supernatural composure impressed him as so suspect. He began to feel that he had been caught in the net of a terrifying shadow, a shadow thrown by anxious clouds drifting, drifting across the ceiling. In its new atmosphere of expectancy and vigilance, the *quartier des enfants* seemed to be swaying back and forth, lazily, queasily, as though suspended in a cage.

And yet, as before, and at the same hour, that night and on the one after it, he tiptoed out of his bedroom and along the corridor to Guillaume's. There, as though on purpose, the door had been left

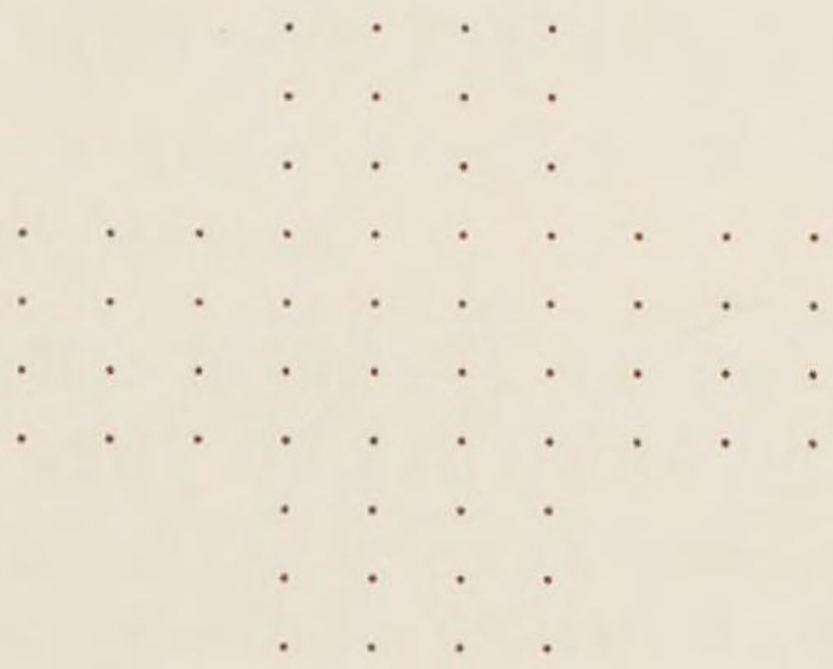
ajar, the bedside lamp left on. There, he would silently take in the spectacle of brother and sister, half-naked, their limbs intertwined, one leg visible above the covers, the outline of the other just discernible beneath, like a swan and its reflection on the surface of a lake.

Like a camera, the eye consumes vistas whole then zeroes in on individual details. That same night Matthew noticed something that had escaped his attention before: strewn over the carpet on both sides of the bed were a handful of loose leaves of a schoolchild's squared paper, on which horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines crisscrossed each other to engender a tangled, starlike, multifarious diagram of mysterious application.

The next morning, while Danielle was in the kitchen scraping grease off a frying pan with a diamond brooch belonging to her stepmother, he questioned her about these diagrams without disclosing in what circumstance he had seen them.

So it came about that he was initiated into *La Petite Croix*.

La Petite Croix was what the French call a *casse-tête*, a mind-teasing puzzle invented by Guillaume and Danielle themselves. On a sheet of squared paper a four-sided cross was marked out thus:



The rule was that one connected up four points in the original design, either horizontally, vertically or diagonally, then added to it a fifth along the same straight line. It would then take off, it would grow ever more complex, ramifying in every conceivable direction, and sometimes off the page itself, until, nearly always without warning, one would be brought up short for lack of any fresh tributaries to pursue and explore.

Guillaume's all-time record stood at a hundred and thirty-two intersecting lines, Danielle's 'in the high hundred and twenties', as she put it; and it was their discarded attempts, their rejects, cast aside

in teeth-gnashing chagrin, that Matthew had noticed on the bedroom floor, as messy as ashtrays disgustingly brimful of cigarette butts.

His own initial stabs at the puzzle were nervous and inconclusive. Very soon, however, he learned to scent out impasses, deceptive advantages, ill-advised gambits; or else, with a satisfaction that seemed scarcely commensurate with what was at stake, the incipient signs of a whole new germinating network of diagonals; and by the day's end he had already achieved his first century.

But though *La Petite Croix*, too, was a drug of sorts, there appeared little danger of it ever entering the bloodstream. Matthew's timely discovery of it, Danielle's enthusiastic assumption of the role of instructress, and Guillaume's watchful overseeing of his progress, served primarily to lower the flat's temperature and allay for a while the tensions that had arisen from its enforced and artificial calm. Any occupation less abstract, less skeletal, was liable to encourage a return to Home Movies.

Even so, Matthew and Danielle were playing it, as they were both aware, in the interstices of the greater game, just as chess pieces, when removed from the board, might while away their idleness by indulging in a friendly hand or two of Snap. The respite, they knew, would be brief: Guillaume's low, premonitory *very well, Danielle, very well*, would sooner or later rebound in their faces. What neither of them could predict was how and when the game would be resumed.

It happened on the second afternoon following that on which Guillaume had paid his forfeit in kind. They were, as usual, in the *quartier des enfants*, Guillaume lying flat out on the carpet, his head cupped in his hands, watching Matthew map out a new cross, Danielle greedily drinking water straight from an enormous carafe.

Suddenly Guillaume snatched the sheet of squared paper from Matthew's hands. Then, jabbing at the just completed cross with his forefinger, looking up at his sister with a maliciously quizzical smile on his face, he asked her:

'What film?'

For almost two days Danielle had been waiting for him to turn the tables on her. The question took her by surprise none the less. She could only, stupidly, oblige him to repeat it.

'Name a film, please, in which a cross is shown to mark the spot of a murder.'

'Are you serious?'

'Why not?'

'There must be dozens of films like that.'

'Then it shouldn't be difficult to name one. You too, Matthew.'

'Me?'

'Is there any rule that prevents me from challenging both of you at once?'

'But what have *I* done, Guillaume?'

'Nothing,' said Guillaume blandly. 'We're playing Home Movies. *N'est-ce pas*, Danielle?'

'But, Guillaume,' Matthew went on, his lower lip starting to tremble again, 'you don't think I had anything to do with . . . with what happened?'

'Name a film,' was Guillaume's answer. 'Or pay the forfeit.'

Vengeance, says a French proverb, is a dish best eaten cold. It was clear that Guillaume preferred his straight from the oven. *A chacun son goût*, as the French also say.

Matthew's mind turned over and over, but to as little purpose as a bicycle wheel when its chain has been removed. If any hope now remained to him of deliverance from the consequences of Guillaume's challenge, consequences on which he dared not dwell, it lay simply in his citing a title. Surely Danielle was right: there exist dozens of films in which a cross marks the spot of a murder; or, if not dozens, perhaps, then a dozen, a half-dozen, three or four – there *must* be at least as many as that.

But because he was utterly in thrall to the fear, the sheer terror, of what would sooner or later befall him in this accursed house, it was no longer possible for him to pull his wits together. Had Guillaume, in fact, merely asked him to name a film, any film at all, there too he might have drawn a blank.

Danielle, meanwhile, had regained her composure. She offered no answer to the question posed her. Nor did she plead, as Guillaume had done, for a clue or a hint. It was she who had brought a new dimension to the game; and she knew her brother, and herself, too well to be deluded into thinking that either of them could ever revert to the petty, childish stakes that had once satisfied them. She appeared to be doing not much more than biding her time, the wisest course to adopt when faced with the inevitable.

'Time's up,' Guillaume finally said in a matter-of-fact tone. 'You must pay the forfeit.'

'The film?' enquired Danielle. It was a mere formality, but one which ought to be respected.

'The film? *Scarface*. Howard Hawks. *Circa* 1932 – or rather, exactly 1932.'

'And the forfeit?'

'Well now,' declared Guillaume, sitting up straight. 'I'm not a sadist, Danielle, as you know. I would just like to see everyone happy, no one left out. So I want you and Matthew, my two dearest companions, to make love together. What could be nicer than that? Not in here, though,' he continued. 'My bed's in a bloody awful mess as it is, and I don't fancy having to sleep with someone else's revolting spunk.'

While Matthew stood stock still, rigid, incapable of moving, Danielle smoked on impassively, asking simple, practical questions as to the precise modalities of what Guillaume expected of her, as though in fear of misunderstanding, of making an error: questions an actress might put to her director during rehearsals.

'Where then?'

'In Matthew's room. In front of the Delacroix reproduction. Who knows,' he proposed with a smile, 'one reproduction might lead to another.'

'You won't mind, I'm sure, if I undress here?'

'Not at all. Wherever you like.'

She stubbed out her cigarette in a brass ashtray that could have been mistaken for a replica of Aladdin's lamp and placed the empty holder on one of its four grooves. Then she walked over to the phonograph and started to play the Charles Trenet record again. Her intention was not to perform a striptease. The melody had become the game's theme tune; it had become unthinkable to pay a forfeit without that familiar bitter-sweet accompaniment.

She disrobed with no undue haste, as for sleep. She neither stared ahead flauntingly at Matthew and Guillaume nor demurely averted her gaze from them. The one vestige of wilful perversity in her performance, a detail, though, by which it was coloured in its entirety, was that she kept the dark glasses on throughout, removing them only at the very end, displaying her eyes, as it were, full frontally.

Danielle, who contrived to wear her grandmother's outmoded garments as persuasively as a bird of paradise its improbable plumage, now appeared disembodied, somehow detached from her

own torso, which she exposed proudly but impartially, as though, instead, she were holding up in an auction room a full-length painting of herself in the nude.

Hers was a fine, slender, feminine torso, without an inch of disfiguring fat, except that its comeliness was not devoid of a certain troubling ambiguity; for one might have said the torso of a male youth *en travesti*, his own gender dissimulated even down to his skin, his bone structure. It was only in its folds, its creases, in its dips and hollows, in the shady indentations running along the abdomen, the paths converging at that magic well deep in the dark fairy-tale forest of the pubis, in the inverted rash of concavities that are so tempting to the finger's inquisitive drill, at the top of the buttocks, behind the knees and across the bony crest of the shoulders, that one was at all conscious of a blur, a vulnerability, a softening of hard edges.

So it was she stood in the puddle of her clothes and waited for Matthew to undress in his turn.

For him the moment had come at last, a moment he had long feared, when he was to be hustled aboard the roller coaster.

The feverish desire he felt for both Guillaume and Danielle, a desire he felt as an ache, an ague, an exquisite malaria, struggled in vain with memories going off in his head with the power of depth-charges – childhood *tableaux* of schoolboys dragged screaming behind playground lavatories and debagged, their sexual organs smeared with boot polish and their pubic hair shaved with some rusty old razor found abandoned in the grass.

Stupid and ridiculous as it must render him in the eyes of his friends, there was but one possibility to be entertained: flight.

He dashed edgeways to the door. But Guillaume, who until that instant had seemed as indolent as an odalisque by Matisse, immediately leapt to his feet and headed him off. Cornered, Matthew backed away.

A spell had been broken. Guillaume and Danielle relaxed. They laughed. Their laughter was very much more foreboding than the silence that had preceded it. They gradually began to close in on him.

'Come, come, my little Matthew,' cooed Danielle, 'you aren't being terribly *galant*, you know. Is the prospect of making love to me so very hateful?'

'I've seen you,' cried Matthew. 'I've watched you. Both of you. In bed together. That's . . . But why should I be dragged into it?'

'Oho,' said Guillaume, 'our guest has been spying on us. Not a very friendly act.'

'What is it you're afraid of?' Danielle taunted. 'What could it be? That you have no crack behind, maybe? I've always fancied that someone as nice and neat and clean as you might have no crack in his backside, just a smooth full moon of pink, baby-soft flesh. Is that it, Matthew, is that what you don't want us to see?'

'No, no, no, please, Danielle, please.'

'Oh come now, Matthew. Come to mama . . .'

They pounced on him. Taller, more muscular than he, they soon had him down on the carpet. They pulled off his sneakers, his white socks, his green Columbia University sweatshirt. In a frenzy he attempted to wriggle out of their grasp. Warm tears sprang into his eyes. A helpless sweep of his arm caused it to brush against Danielle's breasts. Yet, as patiently as though they were peeling the cheeks of an artichoke, as methodically as though they were subjecting him to the Chinese torture of a thousand cuts, they went about their executioners' business, baring the hairless, slightly concave, adolescent chest, the downy arms, the slim, suntanned legs.

By now Matthew had ceased to offer any further resistance. With Danielle sitting astride his legs, his arms pinioned to the carpet by Guillaume, he lay there weeping as very young children weep, in a welter of tears and snot. He was nude except for a pair of light blue jockey shorts: which is to say, he was not nude at all, since nudity tends to be contingent on the disclosure of that one area of the body alone, to which the rest is all but extraneous.

With a flick of her wrists Danielle pulled his underpants to his feet and flung them in a ball on the floor.

The first surprise was the whiteness of his crotch. Compared to his arms, his legs, his chest, the perennially bronzed chest of the kind of American youth for whom the sun is as simple, familiar and nourishing a source of energy as a glass of cold milk, his naked abdomen made them think of the pale patch on a wall where a painting has once been hanging.

His pubic hair was as dark, silky and unfrizzy as that of an Oriental. His testicles were two large grey gooseberries. His penis, which was circumcised, was small, almost but not quite abnormally small, and so plump and round as to resemble, rather, a third testicle. A charming thing, indeed, which, no sooner had one set one's eyes on it, one felt like tenderly cupping between one's palms like a throbbing little sparrow.

And before he had time to voice an appeal, Danielle began moulding this penis with gentle, skilful hands, a potter's hands, moulding it, sculpting it, glazing it, smoothing out its wrinkles; gently, always gently.

To Matthew the sensation of an alien hand on his sexual organs felt as though he had just discovered a hitherto unexplored limb of his own. He drew in his breath. His eyelids were twitching. Something hard and tight within him, with which he had had to live for what seemed like centuries, something that had caused his soul to feel crucified inside his body – that something had been abruptly, miraculously, set free.

Did Guillaume recognise the transformation, the shedding of skin? The fact is that he just as abruptly released Matthew's arms, which, as though by instinct, wrapped themselves around Danielle's naked shoulders. She eased her body along his, squashing the penis that was now erect and drolly curved like the arm of an Empire sofa, drawing from Matthew another sharp intake of breath.

Their mouths edged closer, then their sexes.

There were still awkwardnesses to be overcome, foolish, childlike awkwardnesses. Both of them were in a way virgins, Matthew because he had never made love except to himself, Danielle because she had never made love except to her brother.

At last, however, their mouths and sexes came together at the same time, like two adjacent buttons being simultaneously buttoned on a crisp shirt front.

While outside could be heard, if anyone had been listening, an inexplicable patter of footfalls just below the bedroom window and a fanfare of police car sirens, Matthew and Danielle gave themselves up, with the adorable clumsiness of love, to what André Breton once magnificently defined as 'a sumptuous ceremony performed underground'.

In short, under Guillaume's eyes, all at once opaque and grey with self-awareness, they paid the forfeit.

That evening no one tiptoed along the corridor of the *quartier des enfants*. But, if someone had, if Guillaume's bedroom door had been left ajar and the blue bedside lamp left on, this is what he would have seen:

Guillaume, Danielle and Matthew sleeping together, inextricably

interlaced. Even at this moment of ecstatic self-renunciation it was seemingly impossible for them to forfeit their innate elegance – one might say, their innate chic. With Guillaume, naked, lying on his back at the head of the bed, his hands clasped behind his neck, forming the letter Y; Danielle in the middle, her own naked body sandwiched, in a snaky, sinuous S, between that of her brother and that of her lover; and Matthew, tightly curled up in a foetal bundle of flesh, resting his head on her belly to form an L: together they resembled nothing so much as the monogram, the trademark, of Yves Saint Laurent.

For all that that first night together in Guillaume's bed constituted a turning point in the precarious equilibrium they had established in the flat, it did not witness an end to the game of Home Movies. On the contrary, it inaugurated a whole new period.

They were now to play it intensely, obsessively, monotonously. They were to play it as a shipwrecked mariner might play noughts-and-crosses on the sand with a cleft stick, as a convict might devise chess endgames with shadows and breadcrumbs; except that, all unknown to them, they were not players at all but pawns, pawns moved inexorably from square to square by the real player of the game, who loomed monstrously over the board like Fantômas over Paris.

During the two weeks or so that followed, the sky plummeted down to earth in sheets of stinging rain, rain as fine and sharp as the guillotine's blade, so that the trio were obliged to remain almost permanently indoors.

At first Guillaume continued to make his daily excursion to the XVIth Arrondissement, circling the Palais de Chaillot without getting off his *mobylette*, then returning to the flat with the baguette of bread or carton of milk he had purportedly gone to fetch. Before too long, however, even these half-heartedly undertaken trips were phased out. The *mobylette* rusted in the damp hallway.

Clocks wound down and were not rewound. Beds stayed unmade, crockery unwashed and curtains drawn. Gradually, the hour of the day, then the day of the week, at last the very month of the year, had its meaning drained out of it. Weekends came and went unobserved. Saturdays and Sundays, which are, in the well-ordered lives of average, upright citizens, the shining face cards of

the social calendar's deck, became ever more hard to tell apart from the faceless number cards of the working week; until it came to the point where the only marker of passing time was a rare visit to a luxury supermarket in the neighbourhood.

These raids – for such, in essence, they were – left Matthew as panic-stricken as when he had had to race through the Louvre. While he would fill his trolley with staple necessities, his two companions breezily stuffed the roomy pockets and linings of their coats with lobsters, truffles and caviar, pâté de foie gras, mangoes and peaches and, on one memorable occasion, a jeroboam of champagne, which Guillaume tucked down the front of his corduroy jeans, the obscene protuberance making him look as though he were wearing a colostomy bag. The supermarket's exits became for Matthew as nerve-racking as an airport customs hall.

In the meantime, the cheques that the poet had left for his children lay uncashed on the mantelpiece.

Marooned on this island not two hundred yards from the church of Saint-Sulpice and the Théâtre de l'Odéon, the three young people behaved exactly as any shipwrecked mariner might have. Once past the initial stage of frantically scanning the horizon for signs of civilisation, of annotating *Pariscope* and reconnoitring the Palais de Chaillot and even deigning to attend a class or two, where they would sit scrawling stars, profiles and geometrical doodles in the margins of their jotters and barely listen to their teachers, they began to resign themselves to what they could all see was destined to be a lengthy sojourn.

When not laden with pilfered delicacies from the supermarket, they cooked and ate whatever foodstuffs remained in the refrigerator. These eccentric decoctions, indiscriminate blendings of sweet and sour, cold and hot, meat and fish, Danielle would proudly serve up at table out of the very saucepans in which she had prepared them. And if either of the men of the house shied away from a lukewarm fondue accompanied by an ice-cold compote of broccoli and prunes or else an inexplicably mustardy lasagne, she would declare with a flourish, 'Go on! Just eat it as though it's the national dish of some still undiscovered country.'

Danielle it was who most zealously held the outside world at bay. She it was who regularly telephoned their parents in the Var, who expertly forged her mother's handwriting to a letter addressed to the headmaster of the school that she and Guillaume attended, announcing that both children were bedridden with viral hepatitis. It was she, too, who accepted to be interviewed by the aunt already

mentioned, commissioned by their parents to occupy herself with the children's welfare whenever the poet's inspiration required a lengthy convalescence under more temperate skies.

This excellent lady (who assumed her function of chaperone, of ministering angel, dutifully but no more than that) had startled her family nearly twenty years before by exchanging a violin for a nightclub: that is to say, she sold the Stradivarius that she had inherited from her grandfather, a celebrated Polish virtuoso, in order to purchase a half-share in *Le Nègre Bleu*, a smoky little cabaret off the Champs-Élysées that was frequented by a motley clientele partaking of both genders and of neither. Overwhelmed by invoices, by Department of Health rules and regulations and by a constantly squabbling staff of hysterical young men, she was only too delighted to learn from her niece that she and her brother were eating healthy food, doing well at school and in bed by eleven o'clock.

Little by little, Matthew was granted access to all the most intimate secrets of his friends.

A yellowing photograph, for instance, torn from a magazine and squirrelled away by Danielle inside a tattered copy of *Le Grand Meaulnes*, of one of the Kennedy sons, in profile, aged about fourteen, just after he had been gored in the neck by a bull at Pamplona, and who was blessed, according to her, blood and all, with 'the handsomest face in the world'.

'We hide our blood,' she said, 'when we ought to flaunt it. For blood is beautiful, as beautiful as a precious stone.'

Guillaume let him examine a page of manuscript which as a child he had filched from his father's desk and which he seriously hoped to auction off one day for a small fortune. Of the two-hundred-odd words in the poet's handwriting only one had not subsequently been crossed out, a word, moreover, destined to serve as the foundation stone of one of his most frequently anthologised poems. He had made a frightful fuss on discovering the loss; for, a single word it may have been, yet that word had been reached by way of lexical and syntactical calculations quite as complex as those undertaken by Einstein to arrive at his equation of relativity. In a foul humour the poor man had spent ten whole days computing his missing word all over again.

Then Danielle showed Matthew a phial of sleeping pills that she had stockpiled over several months on the pretext of one feigned

insomnia or another. These were intended for her eventual suicide, should it ever come to that.

'They are my return ticket,' she said, pledging him not to look while she carefully restored them to their hiding place.

And:

'There are born suicides and born non-suicides. The former do not necessarily kill themselves, the latter sometimes do. I belong to the first category, you to the second.'

'I will never kill myself,' Matthew said bluntly. 'I believe, I *truly* believe, that if one kills oneself one goes to Hell.'

Matthew, too, had willingly betrayed his ultimate secret, that of the avenue Hoche.

'It's because one is already in Hell that one kills oneself.'

'That's witty,' replied Matthew, 'but Jesus was wittier. Let me put it this way: I will never kill myself, because I love you.'

'You say that but you may not always love me.'

'I will always love you.'

'I wonder. If *amour* did not rhyme with *toujours*, perhaps we'd never have felt any compulsion to equate love with eternity.'

They spoke often of incest, of physical love between a brother and sister.

'What would you do if your parents ever found out?' he asked her one day.

'It must not happen.'

'Yes, but if by chance it did happen?'

'It must not happen.'

'Well, all right. But let's say that your parents happened to discover the truth. What would you do then?'

Danielle reflected for a moment.

'It must not happen.'

'Besides,' said Danielle thoughtfully, 'when a mother and father sleep together, isn't that a form of incest?'

Langlois and the Cinémathèque had long been forgotten. They had a Cinémathèque of their own, a Cinémathèque in flesh and blood. Which meant that the game was no longer to be played merely whenever the inclination might seize them. While they read

during the day, or played at *La Petite Croix*, or amorously fumbled one another, Guillaume with Danielle, Danielle with Matthew, Matthew with Guillaume, the curtain would rise on Home Movies every night, at six-thirty, eight-thirty and ten-thirty. There were no matinées except on Sunday.

No longer was there any question of lying in wait for the occasion to arrive, for a correspondence, an epiphany, a moment of grace; no longer would they be satisfied even with provoking such moments. From six-thirty in the evening and thereafter the cinema was everything and everything was the cinema.

The *quartier des enfants*, which is what the flat was now being reduced to, with occasional excursions to the kitchen, became an allusive, reverberating echo chamber, through which phrases known to every cinephile in the world would waft like smoke rings.

'Garance! Garance!'

*

'You know how to whistle, don't you?'

*

'I can walk, Calvero, I can walk!'

*

'It was Beauty that killed the Beast.'

*

'Vous avez épousé une grue.'

*

'We heard you were dead . . .'

*

'Marcello! Marcello!'

*

'It took more than one man to change my name to Shanghai Lil.'

*

'Tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima.'

*

'Bizarre? Moi, j'ai dit bizarre? Comme c'est bizarre!'

*

'Ich kann nichts dafür! Ich kann nichts dafür!'

*

'Round up the usual suspects!'

*

'Yoo hoo! Mr Powell!'

*

'Well, nobody's perfect.'

*

'Pauvre Gaspard!'

*

'Où finit le théâtre? Où commence la vie?'

*

'Rosebud . . .'

*

And:

'I love you . . .'

*

'Je t'aime . . .'

*

'Ti voglio bene . . .'

*

'Ich liebe dich . . .'

*

'Te quiero . . .'

Costumes were improvised, gestures rehearsed, scenes that had not worked the first time were granted a second chance or else dropped from the programme. There was no censorship. There was no Hays Code.

One evening, rummaging through a wardrobe, Matthew unearthed an ancient overcoat that the poet had worn week after week during one of the appalling winters of the Occupation. Its fur was moth-eaten and dubious. It might have been woven out of the pubic hair of a Filipino houseboy.

He threw it over his shoulders; then, completing his costume with one of the cardboard boxes in which Guillaume stored his collection of *Cahiers du Cinéma,* on the front of which he scribbled a set of indelibly simian features, snipping out two holes for his own eyes, he made a sensational appearance at the bedroom door in the guise of a monstrous ape.

'What film?'

Guillaume and Danielle screamed out: '*King Kong*! *The Phantom of the Rue Morgue*! *Godzilla*!' Matthew shook his ape's head. With a wiggle of his bottom, his arms dangling low at his sides, his back arched, he staggered over to the phonograph where, to the voice of Charles Trenet, he began to dance an obscene shimmy inside the fur skin and the cardboard mask.

He removed the head. His face was rouged, his eyelashes were caked with kohl, his hair was powdered with flour. He slowly eased

himself out of the coat, underneath which he was completely naked. Naked, he continued to dance.

Only then, giggling, did Guillaume cry out:

'Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus*!'

Whereupon, before another minute elapsed, it had become Danielle's turn to ask: 'What film?'

Caught off their guard, the two boys looked blankly at her and at each other and shook their heads.

'*A Night at the Opera*,' she replied; and when they continued to express blankness, she pointed at Matthew's circumcised and tumescent member:

'Look – Groucho's cigar topped by Chico's hat and surrounded by Harpo's hair!'

They collapsed in laughter.

On another occasion Guillaume happened across a whip that had been stowed away for some mysterious reason inside the flat's tiny lumber room beneath a set of tennis racquets and a complete edition of the Comtesse de Ségur tied together with a leather strap like the textbooks of a nineteenth-century schoolboy. Draping his naked body in a white sheet, locking the window and turning on the hot water tap full blast to suffuse the bathroom with swelling steam clouds, so that it was lent the atmosphere of a Turkish hammam, he saw himself, the whip in his hand, a canary-hued Stetson on his head, as the hero of *8½*. And to reinforce the resemblance with Fellini's film he found among the poet's collection of 78s a scratchy Stokowski rendition of 'The Ride of the Valkyries', which also provided a welcome relief from the eternal Trenet.

So, timing each crack of the whip to the crash of a Wagnerian climax, he spun it shoulder-high about his head while Danielle and Matthew, squealing like children, nearly invisible in the vapours of steam, scrambled in and out of the blistering hot bathtub to avoid being nicked on their ankles, their elbows and buttocks.

With the fleet-footed grace of those scene shifters who soundlessly rearrange the décor of our dreams, one film would dovetail into the next. The bath, now overflowing, would become Cleopatra's bath from the film by Cecil B. De Mille. For want of asses' milk a couple of pint bottles of the pasteurised cows' brand would be used, the contents of which Matthew would then pour into the tub, with Danielle opening her legs as wide as scissor blades to receive between them, as in an advertisement for Cadbury's chocolate, the two confluent streams of opaline liquid.

No longer merely the bedroom's antechamber, a brief haven for

some temporary fugitive from the game, the bathroom had come to serve as an adjacent film set, the alternative theatre of their activities. The tub was spacious enough to accommodate all of them at once, provided that Matthew sat in the middle to enable Guillaume and Danielle, at either end, to encircle his waist with their matchingly long legs, the toes of the one stretching just as far as the armpits of the other. And it was there, rose-pink, water-wrinkled fingers lazily exploring moist, shining torsos, that, like a team of Hollywood scenarists, they worked out the plot of their 'puppet film'.

How to describe this film?

Since its action unfolds entirely in the tub itself, Danielle immediately decides to entitle it *Soap Opera*; and if they are to refer to it as a puppet film, it is because its narrative is generated by the first two fingers, the 'walking' fingers, of the hand.

Guillaume lies stretched out in a tub half-filled with hot and foamy water, his abdomen clearing its surface like a desert island in the Pacific, his dark, curling penis a volcano on the horizon, perhaps extinct and perhaps not.

Representing the sun is a mauve, bell-shaped art nouveau lamp above the bathroom mirror.

Out of this ocean there emerges a Man, doubtless the sole survivor of some shipwreck. (The character is 'played' by the forefinger and second finger of Matthew's right hand, while he himself crouches by the bathtub, like a puppeteer, out of sight.) The Man drags himself ashore (Matthew's fingers bent painfully at the joints); and, after spluttering for a moment or two, begins to explore the island on which he has been marooned. Believing himself to be utterly alone and friendless, he succumbs to despair, a despair from which he is delivered, like Robinson Crusoe, by the discovery of a footprint (Guillaume's navel).

It is then that the maker of the footprint, a Woman, appears (played by the first two fingers of Danielle's right hand, their nails painted bright vermilion).

Man meets Woman. They fall in love, dance (fingers intimately linked), leap around the island 'in slow motion' (fingers drifting raptly in mid-air), make love on the beach after the manner of Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr in *From Here to Eternity*. Together, as well, they brave the perils of a tropical downpour (from the shower appliance held up by Matthew) and the sudden eruption of the volcano (Danielle vigorously masturbating her brother until the

whole island trembles and the lovers are enveloped in milky warm lava).

Alas, recklessly swimming offshore, the Woman is devoured by a shark (Guillaume's right hand surfacing from the bathtub's depths). The Man, alone again, is heartsick. Like Joan Crawford at the climax of *Humoresque* he wades into the sea. It closes over his head.

The drama has a happier coda, however. From the ocean the Man's soul (Matthew's hand imitating the wings of a dove) flutters into the sky, fragments the sun's rays and is joined by that of the Woman. Reunited for all eternity, they enter Heaven as one.

Matthew switches off the bathroom lamp. The film is over.

But it was probably a spectacular Busby Berkeley production number dreamed up by the two young men that constituted the game's masterpiece, its apotheosis.

Guillaume had always had a weakness for the exploding stars, the revolving water lilies, the exquisitely garlanded wheels on which that Grand Inquisitor, that Torquemada, of choreographers had broken so many scantily attired butterflies. So this, he announced, would be their most ambitious and lavish presentation to date, a real *morceau de bravoure*.

Laughing at the absurdity of it all, and momentarily assailed by the thought of how their conduct would be likely to strike some unknown, uninvited observer who chanced to stumble on their intimacy, he and Matthew fetched the heavy gilt-framed mirror from above the drawing-room fireplace, and another from his parents' bathroom, and set them upright against facing walls in Guillaume's bedroom, so that likeness upon likeness of themselves could be seen receding, on either side of the makeshift performing area, into vertiginous infinity.

Exceptionally, Danielle was barred from attending any of these preliminaries; and when rehearsals were over, and everything was ready, instead of being permitted to watch the show curled up in bed, she had one of the straight-backed chairs pulled forward especially for her, as though she were a fond parent at an improvised concert got up by her children.

It comprised two scenes.

In the first of these Guillaume and Matthew appeared before her as Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler. They wore, respectively, a cadet's faded khaki uniform and peaked cap, several sizes too small, and a yellow taffeta dress and cloche hat, both of which had belonged to

Danielle's grandmother. In these outfits, they resembled the paper cut-out figures to which little girls attach a complete wardrobe of paper costumes by folding them back along the dotted lines.

Standing together side by side, Guillaume to the right, Matthew to the left, humming in unison the 'Lullaby of Broadway', they began to perform a double striptease, with Guillaume setting the ball in motion by untying the ribbon on Matthew's dress, then neatly darting behind him and reappearing on his left so that Matthew, in his turn, was able to unbuckle Guillaume's belt; whereupon he too would dart around Guillaume, but this time in front of him, proceeding from accessories to clothes proper, from clothes to underclothes, and all with such deftness and speed that Danielle had the impression, almost, of an entire stage-length lineup of chorus boys and girls weaving in and out of one another, each of them removing a single item of clothing from the next in line until the very last in succession had been stripped quite bare.

It was then that they launched into 'By a Waterfall'. Stretched out across the bedroom floor, mirrored into infinity, their legs wide apart, the tips of their toes just touching, and singing the song as well as they knew how, despite giggling helplessly, despite forgetting most of the words, they started to masturbate in time with each other. Their penises became harder and harder, more and more erect, until it seemed, if one half-closed one's eyes, as though they too would end by meeting in the middle. Then at last, when they reached the 'Waterfall' refrain, with its little falsetto trill, they ejaculated at exactly the same instant, their energies now so intensely, so exclusively, channelled into their sexual organs that in the wild, spasmatic fury of the moment the proportions of reality became surrealistically inverted and each of them began to feel that, naked on the floor, he had somehow been metamorphosed into a colossal phallus on whose throbbing vein there stood, bolt upright, a purple-complexioned homunculus spitting gobs of sperm from his tight, lipless mouth.

Seated in her chair, Danielle applauded with enthusiasm. She cried, 'Encore! Encore!' – a request with which neither of the two exhausted performers was able to comply.

So the days passed, jubilant, implacable, divided by the nights that succeeded them as two frames of a film are divided by a black strip.

*

Danielle dispatched a second letter to the school headmaster, in her mother's name, regretfully anticipating a protracted convalescence for her brother and herself, and she and Guillaume took turns at telephoning their parents in the Var. The poet, it transpired, had come down with a plaguey kind of flu, probably something he had caught from his own sickly inspiration. The return to Paris would almost certainly have to be delayed.

Matthew, too, spun a web of mendacity. He sent off letter after letter to his anxious mother and father. These letters were not as informative as before, so that he was pleased to announce that he had been able to move out of his hotel and into an apartment belonging to a famous French author, whose children, as luck would have it, were of his own age and shared his interests.

This unforeseen turn of events thrilled his parents, impressed that their painfully shy son was emerging from his shell at last and getting in with the right sort of people.

The cheques on the mantelpiece had long since disappeared under an endlessly mounting pile of books, magazines and comic strip albums, and then forgotten about. Matthew had an overdrawn bank balance that was provisioned only every other month by a cheque from San Diego. Raiding the supermarket had therefore ceased to be a luxury and had become a necessity. Unfortunately, their regular forays *à trois* had ended by rendering them conspicuous to its personnel. The store's detective had been alerted to the trio's presence; and though they immediately counter-attacked by setting up diversions and planting decoys, and on one occasion had noisily rampaged through the store bearing about their persons only those articles they were prepared to pay for, with the idea of provoking an intervention on the part of the detective and pleading outraged innocence after a fruitless search had been conducted, they were soon reluctantly compelled to acknowledge that the halcyon era of lobster and caviar was drawing to a close.

The kitchen sink was now an automobile graveyard of dirty dishes. Shirts, pullovers and jeans boasted an amazing spectrum of stains. Pairs of underpants that had been disgustedly rejected days before as being quite beyond redemption were picked up off the carpet and yanked out from underneath sofas and armchairs, judged the best of a bad lot and pressed into further service. As for *La Petite Croix*, for which only the most pristine leaves of paper could once have satisfied tastes as fastidious as theirs, now that these niceties had been definitively consigned to a dim, long irretrievable past, any handy scrap of paper would have to do.

And because Guillaume's bed sheets had been worn ragged and would come loose and catch between the toes of their bare feet, obliging one or other of them to rise infuriated in the early hours of the morning and tuck them back under the mattress, they eventually decided to decamp to Danielle's room.

If this had never served as the theatre of their debauchery, it was partly out of sheer habit and partly out of a wistful, undeclared respect on Danielle's part for a petit-bourgeois ideal of apple-pie orderliness. Like certain half-demented housewives who will polish and scrub their front parlours to a hallucinatory sheen, so that no one dare set foot inside them, she insisted that her bedroom should remain untrespassed upon by the others 'in case a visitor calls'. Besides which, it had been very convenient for her, whenever occurred one of their ferocious squabbles, to storm out of Guillaume's room into her own, draw the bolt on the door and, ravenously biting into an apple as though it were her brother's thigh, bury herself, appropriately enough, in one of the John Dickson Carr locked-room murder mysteries on which she doted.

For, like the moon, this planet had its dark side as well.

Unhappiness may sometimes lie in our failing to obtain *exactly* the form of happiness we should have chosen for ourselves.

A taste for vengeance on Guillaume's part, of a childish type that he and his sister had regularly exacted from each other since they were barely able to crawl, had brought Matthew and Danielle together; and had, in consequence, little by little, like some dull, insinuating toothache, exposed him to a sentiment of which he had always been haughtily innocent: jealousy. It was not, as yet, as though he were exactly unhappy: as yet these twinges of jealousy were too faint and sporadic for that; merely that the happiness accorded him had to be reconciled with that which would have been of his choosing had he been a completely free agent.

Was it of Matthew that he had become jealous? It may be, rather, that he was jealous, in the word's other sense, of a once exclusive hold that he had had over his sister's body and soul. At odd moments he found himself almost nostalgic for the purity of the taboo that together they had breached. That that very purity, now, had been breached in its turn by the intrusion of a third person, no matter how fond he was of Matthew, was a source of obscure distaste to him. There was, moreover, an aspect to their escapades by which he could not help being reminded of South American transvestites

prowling the Bois de Boulogne by night, of those ultra-respectable avenues surrounding the Arc de Triomphe and whose pavements are lined by call girls as evenly spaced out as parking meters and of orgies planned by bright young executives with luxuriously stocked bars and two-way mirrors.

Nor was it of help to Guillaume that Matthew, despite having shed his skin, continued to wear his heart stitched to his sleeve like a Star of David. He devoured both Guillaume and his sister with his eyes, with his lips, his hands, his sex. He loved them, and he loved them all the more for having at last been freely authorised to love them.

I love you. How hard to invest these words with freshness, with sincerity, harder even than *To be or not to be* for an actor. Yet they came to seem as natural to Matthew as breathing. He never wearied of repeating them. He repeated them a hundred times a day.

Guillaume had accepted almost as a right, as something, in any event, which went without saying, the *I love you* addressed to him; that which was destined for Danielle he could not hear without a pang of resentment.

In a way, he was just as vulnerable as Matthew. What he might have wished for himself was to have had innumerable friends, for each of whom he would be the one and only friend.

It was, he concluded one morning, high time for a change.

His proposal was that they spend a few days at La Folletière. This was a sixteenth-century château in Normandy, approximately an hour's drive out of Paris, with a natural moat formed by the River Eure, which looped around its walls. It belonged to their maternal grandmother, whose hats and gowns Danielle had been appropriating. She lived there alone save for her Breton housekeeper Madeleine and her dog Rex, short for Oedipus Rex, so named because as a pup it had broken its own father's neck in a spat and impregnated its mother, whose whole litter it had been necessary to drown in the Eure.

This old lady in her eighties was adored by her grandchildren. They readily bestowed on her the love and respect they denied their parents, abjuring, for once, the casual, unreflecting bigotry of young people who seem to forget that they too are destined to grow old. They brought her presents, candied figs from Fauchon or the latest Françoise Sagan. They listened to her rambling, incoherent

anecdotes as though they were hanging on every syllable. In a word, they spoilt her.

To begin with, Guillaume's proposal was greeted without enthusiasm. But he persisted. He pointed out that the refrigerator was literally bare, that the condition of their clothes had become absolutely intolerable, that the cats were starving. At La Folletière they would eat good clean country food, meat and cheese and white cream. Madeleine would take charge of their laundry. They would be cosseted.

By degrees Danielle and Matthew allowed themselves to be persuaded. A change, Danielle told herself, would do them good. After all, the exiguity of the *quartier des enfants* was starting to cramp their style and she was by no means eager to see her bedroom reduced to the pigsty that Guillaume's was. A new vista of opportunities opened up with La Folletière's cobwebby landings and staircases, its escutcheons, its grandfather clocks, its swarthily varnished family portraits.

It was Danielle, too, who suggested that they enlist the aid of her good friend Rollo, who would drive them down in his second-hand Italian sports car; and if they made a detour first, by way of the Champs-Élysées, they could deposit the starving cats with their aunt.

This Rollo was the Argentinian who, instead of *no*, said *na-a-ah*. He inhabited two spacious, high-ceilinged rooms in the Right Bank flat of a wealthy Cuban diplomat, an acquaintance of his father's, called Guevara. Thus, if he invited someone to visit him, he gleefully told him to ring the bell 'chez Guevara', a pun he had not yet tired of after nine months of living in Paris.

His ambition was to be a film director; and when he spoke, he had a habit of framing the world between the outstretched palms of his hands, aligned one on top of the other and spaced apart by his upraised thumbs. Otherwise, he would stroke his goatee as affectionately as though it were a little black kitten.

He was in his late twenties. Much older than his friends, he would jovially smack them on the back with loud whoops of *'Ah, mon grand ami Guillaume!'* and *'Et voilà cette très chère Danielle!'* failing to realise that such bracing tokens of friendship tend to be appreciated more by the person offering them than by the person receiving them.

His Jewish ancestry prevented him from warming to Germans. He took pleasure in baiting them. Once in Bayreuth, contemplating a

statue of Wagner, he exclaimed, deliberately within earshot of the city's proud burghers:

'Aha, Mozart – the waltz king!'

Or else, inventing the game of Hell, a Hell that would be populated by, for instance, an English cook, a Spanish mechanic, an American politician, and so forth, he would conclude, with a 'Homeric' laugh, 'And . . . a *German*!'

In truth, he could sometimes be a little too Homeric for comfort, but when on form he was a wellnigh irresistible companion.

Rollo had never before been invited to the château and he agreed to the scheme with a readiness that surprised them. It did not occur to him to look askance at the dustbin liner bag filled to the brim with all their dirty laundry, at the dishevelled hair or the presence of Matthew. For him these signs of disorder constituted his friends' 'poetry', their 'elegance', their 'legend'. From the children of a poet he expected no less.

Shooting his cuffs, he bundled them into his tiny four-seater convertible.

The trip was a delightful affair.

Erratically steered, slung low on the ground, the little Italian sports car left Paris by the Versailles road. Because its top had been left down its passengers' hair was blown backwards as though by the sudden gusts of wind that, in Biblical films, announce impending miracles.

Before entering Normandy itself their route followed an absolutely straight line. Then the motorway had to be abandoned for a circuit of meandering side roads on which pheasants and quail would appear to wait until the very last instant before fluttering nervously out of their path, almost as though imitating the Chicken Run from *Rebel Without a Cause*.

And then, just an hour after setting out, Guillaume swung open La Folletière's tall, rusting wrought iron gates and the car ran smoothly up the driveway.

The house was the double more or less of the château of Moulinsart in which Tintin lives with Captain Haddock. It had been burgled so

often, so expertly, that there remained only furniture of the most doubtful provenance and paintings whose sole value was sentimental: nineteenth-century portraits of illustrious admirals stiffly posed in front of ethereal seascapes more appropriate to Poussin nymphs than to officers in Bonaparte's navy; or of generously proportioned admirals' wives, black mantilla fans grasped between pudgy fingers and resting on the laps of flower-patterned gowns, who reminded one, by default, of what a master Ingres was.

The systematic pillage was not by chance. When answering the telephone to strangers, the children's grandmother, who was very hard of hearing, would ingenuously shriek into the receiver: 'No, my daughter' (for instance) 'isn't here! No one is here but me! I'm just an old lady all alone in her château.' It would take no more than a day or two thereafter for a ground floor window to be noiselessly prised open and a rare set of Fragonard etchings or an inscribed first edition of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* to be spirited away.

Like certain remote tribesmen who, it is said, have never assimilated the link between physical love and reproduction, it had not once dawned on the old lady that her inopportune candour might have been the cause of which these thefts were the effect. She professed to be as mystified as her grandchildren when the losses were discovered.

La Folletière was also overrun by insects, by wasps, hornets, bees and monstrous black spiders. The latter were of such a length and breadth that, seeing one of them stationary on a wall, one would have taken it to be the sinister emblem of some secret society. At night, in search of warmth, they lowered themselves from their webs as stealthily as a fairy-tale princess from a castle tower and settled upon the faces of sleeping guests.

On the Eure, when they arrived, could be seen the four geese of indeterminate gender that Guillaume, whose fifteenth-birthday present they had been from his grandmother, had chosen to baptise Hector, Suzanne, Hippolyte and Barbara la Grise. And when he stepped out of the car they waddled up the bank one after the other to greet him with deafening squawks. A well-practised ritual then required that he stretch out flat along the gravel pathway, whereupon Hector and Barbara, by far the tamest, would amorously begin to nibble at his hair, Hector on his left, Barbara on his right, as though parodying a famous photograph of Konrad Lorenz.

Hippolyte and Suzanne would meanwhile fussily straighten out their feathers; and when they had finished, the various layers would

be carefully filed away, collapsing together as neatly as those of a folding road map.

Guillaume and Danielle kissed their grandmother. She was installed in her wheelchair on the lawn screwing up her eyes at a copy of *Le Figaro* that she was obliged to read practically sideways. Shouting into her ear, Danielle introduced the two newcomers.

Lunch was about to be served. The afternoon being a mild one, the meal was to be al fresco. Madeleine would serve it on the lawn in front of the narrow flight of steps that led down to the Eure. Hardly addressing Guillaume and Danielle, whom she had known since their infancy, mumbling to herself like someone moving her lips while reading, she tramped back and forth from the kitchen to the table, bearing plates, glasses, cutlery and a large enamel water jug. The table itself had to be swivelled round until it was positioned to her mistress's approval. Even in the open air, its place had to be exactly right, 'in the middle of the room', as she phrased it. In this matter she could be just as finicky as someone endeavouring to realign a painting that hung askew.

Everything, at last, was as it should be. Her wheelchair was drawn forward to the head of the table and Madeleine proceeded to serve each of them a meagre portion of chicken smothered in the watery ratatouille that she dourly affected to call her *spécialité*.

Danielle made a face.

'What is it, my little Danielle?' said her grandmother, masticating a sliver of white meat so stringy that her facial expressions stayed only just this side of professional contortionism. 'Don't you like what good Madeleine has prepared for us?'

'For me,' Danielle spat out in disgust, 'eating ratatouille is like vomiting in reverse!'

The retort caused the old lady to cackle so irrepressibly that her false teeth started to clatter.

'Oh, Danielle, you always know how to make me laugh!'

Seated together opposite their octogenarian hostess, startled by the paroxysm of glee, half-childish and half-ghoulish, that had momentarily transfigured her papery features, Rollo and Matthew picked uneasily at the ratatouille which had started to lose what scant appeal it had ever possessed.

Wiping her rheumy eyes with a filthy white handkerchief that she drew from the sleeve of her blouse, she went on, 'Just as long as you don't vomit the right way round!'

Danielle clapped her hands delightedly while Madeleine glared at her from beneath her shapeless, pseudo-Breton bonnet. 'Why, Granny,' she screamed, 'I do believe we've invented perpetual motion! With a big bowl of ratatouille no one would ever need to cook again!'

The laughter of the two women, separated as they were by an abyss of seventy years, seemed to blend together so seamlessly, in such wondrous harmony, that it was all but impossible to know where Danielle's ended and her grandmother's began.

With the conversation at table, unfortunately, the abyss once more opened wide.

Learning that Rollo was from the Argentine, his hostess simperingly enquired after her 'very dear friend', the country's ex-President. In the exchange of civilities that ensued, Rollo, a rabid anti-Peronist, found himself resigned to demurring as politely as he was able under the circumstances: 'Yes, to be sure, dear Madame, there *was* a call for stronger measures, but . . .' or else 'It's quite true that Evita was adulated by her people. However . . .'

Then, turning to Matthew, she graciously alluded to the Shrivers and the Vanderbilts; and when, with Guillaume and Danielle holding their sides, he was forced to plead ignorance of these as of every other family in the Four Hundred, a baffled old lady peered at him over the gold rims of her half-moon spectacles.

Later, as coffee was being served, she presented each of her guests with a copy, which she tremblingly, almost illegibly inscribed, of a slim travel memoir she had had published at her own expense. Its title was *A Voyage to the Land of the Setting Sun* and it recounted her first and only trip to the United States in the company of her late husband, a sugar magnate.

This little *plaquette* had a special charm all of its own. Though the journey had been undertaken in the early fifties, when the shipping lanes of the North Atlantic could scarcely have been regarded as off the beaten track, it was narrated as a voyage of discovery, in the manner of Robert Louis Stevenson, as though no European of that period had ever heard of skyscrapers or colour television sets.

It was after four o'clock when Madeleine cleared the table.

On the far side of the Eure there was an island, which consisted of one large, oblong meadow. A herd of cows was grazing on it. The trees had had their lowest branches chewed off so that they looked

as even and flat as though some topiarist had been cropping them. During the afternoon the cows had ambled closer and closer to the river's edge until they were aligned directly in front of the lunch party.

'Oh, they come here every day at this hour,' said the old lady to Matthew. 'Is it the afternoon's freshness, do you suppose, that they are seeking?'

Since their grandmother had made that selfsame remark every afternoon at the same hour, for as long as Guillaume and Danielle could remember, it was, they thought, probably in quest of the phrase as much as the freshness that the cows approached.

Rollo's presence, they realised too late, would make playing the game inconceivable. He had something of a circus ringmaster about him, something, too, of Mandrake the Magician, whose paunched and fleshy stand-in he might have been.

So, instead, they decided to hole up in one of the long-untenanted rooms of which La Folletière's huge and humid top floor was a warren. It was named the Tintinnerie. Years before, the children had stuffed its dusty trunks and bandboxes with their complete collection of Tintin albums. They were there still, alongside Spirou comic books, scouting annuals and a nineteenth-century illustrated edition of Jules Verne.

A small brass bell, known from time immemorial as the Tintinnabulator, was still suspended from the door. Fastened to a wire that ran under the floorboards along the landing, it gave forewarning of any unwelcome stranger on the prowl.

There they dug out an ancient Ouija board that one of the children's nannies, a Christian Scientist from Boston, had brought with her to France. It had clearly been purchased from Woolworth's or its equivalent; and Danielle, convinced that no self-respecting astral body would deign to respond to so cheap and mass-produced a sounding board, viewed with distaste Guillaume's idea of holding a seance there and then in the Tintinnerie.

But this time the others were deaf to her scorn. In the absolute silence prescribed for these experiments Matthew (who as an American was reckoned to speak the language of the Ouija) set about calling up the spirits.

To their amazement, no sooner had these spirits been enjoined to manifest themselves than the Ouija board from Woolworth's began rocking back and forth, vibrating, straining at their tense fingertips

like a dog straining at its leash. The little baize table on which it sat shook with its occult exertions. With hardly a pause, as efficiently as a ticker tape machine, it spelled out one message after another, messages that were either meaningless jumbles of letters or else couched in some abstruse psychic code that they were unable to crack.

What amazed them most of all was the fact that its communications were directed exclusively at Matthew. It was to him that the board would repeatedly, obstinately, return, however much his envious companions might attempt to divert its attention to themselves.

On the first evening, out of the scores of messages that Rollo painstakingly transcribed, only one proved to be at all susceptible to interpretation. It read:

TUESTUE

This mysterious configuration left them no less puzzled than earlier ones had done until Danielle thought to divide it up thus:

TU ES TUE

or:

YOU ARE KILLED

Matthew, who believed only in God, seemed as untroubled by such a warning as Guillaume and Danielle, who did not believe in anything at all. But Rollo was superstitious. His credulousness was of an orthodox order. Ladders, broken mirrors, black cats and spilt salt were as so many vigilant daemons to be propitiated. When typing a letter to one of the film producers from whom he nurtured starry-eyed hopes of financial backing, he would lightly brush the keys with the forefinger of his left hand and gaze unblinkingly at a stuffed rabbit's foot brandished in his right high above his head. Furthermore, he accepted unquestioningly a superstition that must be peculiar to the Argentine: that it brings bad luck to think of an elephant when crossing a bridge. The very existence of such an absurd curse tended naturally to mean that, when crossing bridges, he and his compatriots thought of little else.

As it happened, they were crossing a bridge just as Matthew had dismissed with a shrug Rollo's admonition that he ought to take the

message of the Ouija board more to heart. It was a narrow stone bridge leading from the grounds of the château to a disused, gutted, bat-infested old barn in which a ping-pong table had been laid out.

Teasingly, Danielle was about to recall the superstition to Rollo's mind when, far overhead, quite invisible, perched somewhere in one of the lovely beech trees bordering the path to the barn, a nightingale began to sing.

There are nightingales and nightingales. This one was a diva, a Callas. One would readily have disbursed a small fortune to hear it sing in a concert hall. Its tone, of an ineffable sweetness, was how one fancied Trilby's to have been; and each of the variations in the repertoire it offered them that evening was not merely as pure and perfect as a snowflake but as distinct from that preceding or following it as one snowflake is from another.

Under a rich, deep, nocturnal sky, a sky hung so low in the firmament that they felt they would have to scrabble on their hands and knees in order to crawl beneath it, a sky of dark blue velveteen as besequinned with stars as the spangly costume of a figure skater, they stood for over an hour on the little narrow bridge, hushed and spellbound, listening to the nightingale.

'I know,' cried Danielle, as the curtain descended at last on the enchanted, enchanting performance, 'I know, as I know my own name, that I shall remember that nightingale to the day I die.'

Then, to Guillaume and Matthew, softly, as though it were some faint last echo of the game, she spoke the hackneyed, timeworn line recalled from a score of Hollywood melodramas:

'This will be our song.'

The next day they strolled about the grounds, Oedipus Rex snapping at their heels. Guillaume and Danielle were on amicable terms with the tenant farmers who rented their farms from their grandmother. They had played in the meadows with their children when they themselves were in their infancy. Now these same children had grown up into sullen, uncommunicative farm hands sitting embarrassed at notched wooden kitchen tables, cutting up loaves of bread into lemon-peel-shaped slices and no longer knowing how to address the fine young gentry from Paris at whom their parents would smile obsequiously.

But the interlopers were not offended. Their minds were elsewhere. Yet another drug was entering their system: the Ouija board. Even Danielle dreamt only of tuning into the unknowable. Overnight her objections had become curiously offhand, raised merely for form's sake.

That evening, however, the Ouija sulked. It did not budge. It categorically refused to communicate the simplest message. Its mute, indifferent self-containment, the self-containment of the inanimate object, surprised them as much as it had, the night before, to see its pointer darting to and fro. And no amount of cheating, of chivvying it, of nudging it more or less surreptitiously with the tips of their fingers, would endow it with even a flickering semblance of life.

On the day succeeding that a fierce gale blew up. By the late afternoon the clouds had started to boil and curdle and turn green at the gills, streaks of lightning were ripping the heavens in two and the thunderclaps that followed ended by stampeding the cows.

What happened next, moments later, was what usually tended to happen during a storm: the lights of La Folletière went out. The four companions made their way upstairs to the Tintinnerie in single file, each with a candle in his or her hand; and the Ouija board, as though it had been revivified by a thunderbolt, set to rocking about practically before they were able to take their seats.

Emerging here and there, and registered by them the way one's ears prick up at the sound of the odd familiar word that one might overhear in a foreign language, the same message as before – and, as before, destined for Matthew alone – was spelled out several times:

TUESTUE

But, about one o'clock in the morning, when they were beginning to yawn and stretch and consult their wristwatches and wonder whether it might not be time to call it a day, the pointer suddenly shuddered to a halt. It held itself in check for a few seconds. Then, having kept back its *pièce de résistance*, its alliterative masterpiece, to furnish itself with a spectacular curtain line, it turned once more to Matthew:

AMOURAMERAMARREAMORT

This time Danielle was not needed as interpreter. Rollo was already spacing the message out as it came through:

AMOUR AMER A MARRE A MORT

Which is to say:

LOVE BITTERNESS DESPAIR DEATH

There was silence.

Danielle raised her fingers from the board.

'*Well!*'

The word was spoken half in earnest, half in derision.

Rollo had paled, his pallor heightened by the thin candlelight flame that quivered in front of him.

' "Well"?' he whispered. 'Is that your response to this . . . to this . . .'

'This what?' asked Danielle, inserting a cigarette in the holder.

'Can't you see the evidence that's staring you in the face? You who quote Napoleon, you who say people are prepared to believe anything so long as it isn't in the Bible, surely you realise what has taken place here?'

'This silly Ouija thing is not the Bible.'

'Who knows?' Rollo answered. 'Perhaps, like God, the Bible is everywhere. Perhaps any book may become the Bible for just as long as it's necessary.'

Danielle burst out laughing.

'What *are* you rattling on about, Rollo darling? A Ouija board is not a book. And this one was bought for fifty cents or so by a fat American bigot whom Guillaume and I loathed at sight. *N'est-ce pas*, Guillaume? If God is reduced to communicating His Word by way of so trumpery a medium, then I must say He has fallen on evil days.'

'You're insane to be speaking like this,' said an ashen-faced Rollo.

It was not that he was of any genuinely religious inclination; just that, for one whose gullibility was of so ecumenical an order, God no doubt represented the most malignant of black cats. If he could have done so without incurring his friends' ridicule he would have crossed himself.

He turned to Matthew. 'Doesn't it worry you? Not in the least? That message, that last word?'

Like many another believer, Matthew was capable of acknowledging that what he shared with someone of a different religion, no matter how vain and trivial that religion might strike him by comparison with his own, was not the power and terror of God but

the power and terror of faith. He had, as well, been grudgingly impressed by the message of the Ouija board, except that he did not care for Guillaume and Danielle to be aware of this.

He was on their side; Rollo, in this instance, on the opposing side. So love bisects the world.

'Let's just say', he replied, smiling shyly, 'that it happens not to be one of my superstitions.'

The following day at lunch, eaten indoors at a huge baronial table of such a length that they could scarcely discern one another's faces behind the candlesticks and vases of fading roses, the subject of a forthcoming wedding in the neighbourhood was casually raised. It was obvious from the way their grandmother spoke not only that Guillaume and Danielle were expected to attend it but that she had assumed all along that it was for this reason they had descended on La Folletière.

The wedding was that of a certain Gonzague de Saint-Cyril, of one of the oldest families in the Touraine, to a cousin of theirs, a long-necked, ungainly young goose of a woman who rejoiced in the name of Jacquemette de la Tour de Presfontaines. She lived with her parents, who themselves had been second cousins, in a smaller though rather more sumptuously appointed château further down-river and could occasionally be spotted from the high Tintinnerie window scuttling about its grounds on a diminutive baby-blue tractor.

Jacquemette, who lisped, spoke little but well. It was either 'Hath it ever occurred to you, couthin Danielle, that the Chinethe eat Chinethe mealth every thingle day?' or else 'If I had my life to live over again, I'd like to be a nigger muthician and have my tuneth whithled by barrow boyth in the thtreet.'

Then she would fling her head back and start laughing, with a braying ha-ha remarkably like that of the Laughing Policeman of the song.

In their childhood her cousins had subjected poor Jacquemette to the full artillery of their contempt. They had callously ragged her, undone her pigtails, smeared her face with the cow pats that every spring turned the meadows adjoining the two châteaux into so many spongy minefields. Over the years these indignities had given way to taunts and then to utter indifference. Yet it was precisely their anarchy, their aloofness, their bohemian appearance and manners, their supercilious rejection of the *vie de château* that was

conducted from one grand house in the region to another, which made them potentially the wedding's star attraction.

Naturally, they protested. Yet their grandmother remained stubborn in the face of their objections. The family would have to be represented. She herself was too incapacitated to attend. Madeleine had washed, ironed and laid out the most presentable of the clothes with which they had arrived at La Folletière and Danielle could make free use of her jewellery. Besides which, she had already accepted for them and arranged that their young friends be invited too.

But it was, in the end, when she tartly hinted that a refusal on their part would result in a telephone call to the Var that Guillaume and Danielle realised they had been defeated. The old lady had surrounded, outflanked them. There was no avenue of flight she had not cut off. They would go to Jacquemette's wedding.

The wedding ceremony was held in the private chapel of the de la Tour de Presfontaines; the reception in the château's English garden.

Underneath every French garden is buried an English garden; it is the same thing, roots side up.

On the blustery April afternoon of the wedding, and in contrast to the château's trim alleyways, its regularly spaced chestnut trees and its bushes that seemed to grow organically in the shapes of eagles and cockerels, the English garden presented the reverse side of the tapestry, with rough, clotted textures, knots like fists and colours all running together.

A row of striped marquee tents had been erected there, in and out of which wandered young men in grey morning suits and soft wing shirt-collars; dowagers, both scrawny and plump, wearing hats as large-brimmed as parasols and unseasonably filmy frocks; and anaemically wasted, exquisitely inbred infants with heavy-lidded eyes and red, flabby lips, their pale, melancholic, Watteauesque beauty set into sharp relief by the gaudy velvet suits in which their parents had seen fit to attire them, and which made them look like Pierrots disguised in Harlequins' costumes.

In the unlikely event of some precocious schoolboy wishing to collect toy aristocrats, like toy soldiers, this wedding offered a complete anthology.

Here they all were: the senile old marquis who had held a minor

position in one of the short-lived governments of the Fourth Republic and ever since had been patiently waiting for the call; the waxy-complexioned count screwing a monocle into his eye as though testing the combination of a safe then training it on the downy, white-stockinged legs of a group of little girls huddled in a corner stuffing their mouths with meringue; the doe-eyed *curé* whose parish was the neighbouring village and whose thwarted hopes of becoming a fashionable literary priest and ferrying dying Academicians 'over to Rome' had been compensated to a degree by the privileged intimacy he enjoyed with this provincial *beau monde;* and, finally, eternally bringing up the rear, the impoverished spinster cousins, in dresses threadbare with wear, tear and defiance, furtively slipping sandwiches and petits-fours into their handbags like characters from a short story by Maupassant.

Confronted by such a crowd of monsters, Guillaume mimicked putting all of them against a wall and mowing them down with an invisible machine-gun.

Danielle, with a grim smile, muttered under her breath:

'Si misère pouvait, si richesse savait.'

But Rollo and Matthew were entranced. For the outsiders they felt themselves to be, their shoulders never having had to bear the great dead weight of ancestry, this crowd, these monsters, these masqueraders, these gargoyles without a cathedral, had the futile charm of gorgeously intricate chess sets which are carved out of ivory or steel and with which no one would ever dream of playing.

'Danielle! Danielle! Oh, couthin Guillaume!'

It was Jacquemette. She bore down on them, her neck sprouting out of her white satin wedding gown, as elongated as Alice's after she had eaten the cake.

She and Danielle immediately kissed twice on both cheeks, curtsying like debutantes in a musical comedy. She attempted to accost Guillaume in an equally expansive fashion; but he would only allow himself, with the churlish grace that he reserved for every such uncongenial sortie into the society of his relatives, to be pecked once on a single cheek. On Rollo and Matthew, to whom she was next introduced, she inflicted the glazed smile of a cocktail party hostess whose eyes are already anxiously flitting about the room in

search of some more prominent guest who might be languishing alone and unattended. Then, a maidenly blush inflaming her raw, windblown features, she swept them off to be presented to the bridegroom.

The famous Gonzague was not at all as they had expected him to be.

They found him smoking a cigarette inside one of the catering tents. Generations of controlled inbreeding had contrived to lend him a sleek hothouse lustre: languorous eyes, extravagantly long eyelashes that seemed to fan backwards over his eyelids like the spokes of a tiny wheel, a glossy black moustache.

His manner was affected. He tried out poses then dropped them for new ones. When he spoke the lighted tip of his cigarette would trace abstract patterns in the air. And it was hard to say whether the wisp of smoke by which he was permanently enhaloed issued from that cigarette or from his own intense and smouldering insides.

As they chatted together Jacquemette girlishly linked her arm in his. She was nibbling at a banana she had lifted from a bowl on one of the long buffet tables that traversed the catering tent. She had unpeeled it as a child would, so that four petal-like skins framed the exposed fruit.

Interrupting some amusing and cynical observation of her husband's on the horror of church weddings, she flutteringly piped up:

'Bananath are my very favourite fruit – exthept that when I'm eating one I feel jutht like a chimpanthee!'

Gonzague bared his magnificent teeth in a strained smile. The others peered down at their shoelaces. Danielle made a mental note to pump her grandmother on the fortune of the Saint-Cyrils, which she could not help suspecting was in a parlous state.

Very much later that afternoon, wandering alone and aimlessly around the estate of the de la Tour de Presfontaines, Danielle chanced upon Gonzague once more. His tie loosened, his glass of champagne posed on the sill beside him, he was speaking to a ravishing young woman beneath one of the château windows that looked on to the Eure. He had clapped the palms of his hands flat against the wall on either side of her head, effectively pinning her to the spot. But she was a consenting prisoner. Sucking on a strand of hair that had strayed across her cheek, she listened intently to what

he was telling her. She could not have been older than seventeen.

At last, as Danielle continued to spy on them, she nodded her head. Gonzague then appeared to ask her if she was certain of her resolve. She nodded again, with greater assurance. Quickly glancing behind him, he drew a fountain pen from his pocket, scribbled what could only have been a telephone number on his starched shirt-cuff, unclasped it and snapped it round her wrist as though he were presenting her with a Cartier bracelet. Then, with a kind of brutal nonchalance, just as the girl was curving her arm sideways to read what he had written, he put his hand under her short, flimsy, almost transparent skirt, pushed it upwards till his elbow disappeared and suddenly gave his wrist the tight, violent little jerk one makes when inserting a light bulb in its socket.

The girl arched her back against the wall and let out a moan. Without another word being exchanged between them, Gonzague turned on his heel and made his way back to the wedding party.

Danielle started to walk down to the encampment of marquee tents.

The sky was darkening over. With the English garden's brambly bushes and overgrown undergrowth, with the striped tents now fairy-lit by Japanese paper lanterns, with the grimacing, rubbery faces that seemed to be pressing themselves against her own as against a window pane and the falsetto laughter that buzzed around her head, the scene, she said to herself, would need only a doleful accordionist and a pug-nosed mongrel snoozing at his feet to complete the resemblance to one of those moonstruck wastelands in Fellini's films.

The episode she had just witnessed had both excited and disgusted her. But she had had enough. She wanted to go home – not to La Folletière but to Paris, to the flat, the game. She would find the others and insist that they return at once. She was not an admirer of Fellini.

Striding from tent to tent, she all but stumbled over another cousin, a tall, thin young man with a face the shape and colour of an old-fashioned wooden spinning-top. He held a glass of champagne in his right hand and a lamb chop in his left.

He greeted her effusively, drunkenly, kissing her on the mouth and squeezing her body close to his. The chop had left a smudge of gravy on his lips that the kiss transferred to hers. Revolted, she wiped it off as though it were excrement and shoved him from her.

He fell over backwards, spilling the champagne from his glass

down his trouser front. For an instant he just sat there, stupidly contemplating the stain it made. Then, just as stupidly staring at the lamb chop that had already been gnawed to the bone, he called out after her in the gloom:

'By the way, Danielle, that reminds me. How is Oedipus Rex?'

She found Guillaume and Matthew standing at the river bank flipping handfuls of flat pebbles against the current. Agreeing to her plan, they set off to look for Rollo.

He was in one of the striped tents, lounging at a long table, gregarious and genial, at ease with himself and with the company. For a while his friends stood on the threshold, listening, taking stock. The conversation inside the tent, as it took them only a minute or two to realise, had as its subject the international conspiracy of bankers and Jews.

Rollo was being a very model of affability and tact. His every sentence was preceded by 'Monsieur le baron . . .' or 'Madame la comtesse . . .'. He was taking issue with his interlocutors as earlier he had with his friends' grandmother, charmingly, courteously. So this time he would say: 'But, Monsieur le baron, even if I were to accept, for the sake of the argument, mind you, that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are authentic . . .' or 'Yes, indeed, Madame la comtesse, there do exist arrogant, pushy Jews just as there exist . . .' He endeavoured to make them see his point of view. He leaned over backwards to be reasonable. He was neither pushy nor arrogant. Nor, for that matter, Jewish.

Danielle watched him from behind the loose flap that served as the tent's doorway.

'If this doesn't beat everything! Look at him, you two. Our precious Rollo hobnobbing with the nobs and conveniently forgetting all those Jewish forefathers of his from Russia or Poland or wherever it was. I bet he's even forced himself to swallow "yid" and "kike". What a buffoon he is!'

'Well, I told you, didn't I?' said Guillaume. 'I told you he was a snob and a poseur. It's only because of papa that he sees us at all.'

'Yes, yes, you told me,' snapped Danielle. 'Bravo. You've made a point.'

Matthew ventured to suggest that he was simply being polite.

'Polite? Half his family die in the gas ovens and he must be polite to the cooks?'

'Oh come now, Danielle. What have your cousins to do with the gas ovens?'

To his surprise her hands trembled as she lit one of her stunted little cigarettes.

'You don't know them, Matthew darling. They're maggots, toads, snakes. *N'est-ce pas,* Guillaume? They have brains like cancerous peas. *N'est-ce pas,* Guillaume? They're the scum of the earth, the scum of the scum, shit, shit that flatters itself it's gold except that the stench always gives it away. Putrefaction, my little Matthew, putrefaction is only interesting if you don't lift up the crust and take a good look at what there is underneath.'

She took a shaky puff on her cigarette. 'Wait here,' she concluded briskly, 'then we're going to get the hell out.'

With that she marched through the tent, alongside the Louis XV chairs that had been incongruously laid out the length of each of the wooden trestle tables, running the gauntlet of slurred halloos roaring up at her from both sides, wilfully ignoring Jacquemette's startled and chalky white features that appeared to have read some dire manifesto on her own high, furrowed and determined forehead. She did not stop until she had arrived at the place where Rollo was sitting.

He looked up uncomprehending. He was alarmed without yet knowing why he ought to be. He seemed to be wondering how to address her. Danielle's gaze was already roaming over the laden table in front of her. It settled on a vast cut-glass bowl of salad topped with tiny pink shrimps radiating out from its centre. Without saying a word, she seized it in her two hands and set it upside-down on his head.

It was at first as though a minute of silence had been called for inside the tent. Even Rollo, bizarrely, observed it, hesitating before removing the bowl. When he did so at last, in a grotesquely refined fashion, he resembled nothing so much as a swimmer emerging out of a shallow rock pool, his hair a snarled entanglement of seaweed and dead minnows.

In the time it took for the commotion to erupt Danielle had swept arrogantly out of the tent and disappeared with her two dumb-struck companions.

The return trip to Paris was not nearly so delightful as setting out had been.

They decided to go straight home, without either taking leave of their grandmother or collecting their clothes from La Folletière. Accounts would have to be rendered, as they were well aware,

regarding the circumstances of their departure from the wedding; there would be an irate telephone call from the bride's parents and a showdown with Rollo, all of which they were concerned to postpone for as long as possible.

Penniless, now without any means of transport, their plan was to hitch-hike back to Paris. But it was not till after ten o'clock at night, when they had covered almost a quarter of the itinerary on foot, sidling along the dangerously narrow verge of the motorway, that a car stopped to pick them up. To their left stood an enormous, brightly illuminated oil refinery disgorging mephitic flames on to the sky and calmly urinating into the Seine.

The car belonged to a young couple with a baby in his own chair on the back seat. The three extra passengers were obliged to squeeze together beside the child, who instantly woke up and began to cry. In his miniature blue sailor-suit jacket and white, fleecy nappies he reminded them of Donald Duck.

He screamed all the way to the Porte de Saint-Cloud, where the couple, inwardly cursing their unselfish impulse, deposited them.

It was raining hard. They started walking in the direction of the Latin Quarter. As they hastened along the Seine embankment, in front of the Trocadéro esplanade, a fire engine went storming past them, its siren wailing, its silver, infinitely extendable ladders pitched at a forty-five degree angle on its back, its massive grey hosepiping coiled tight in a niche like braided hair, its scarlet-clad firemen clinging on for dear life like the Keystone Kops.

Its appearance suddenly made Matthew think of his bedroom in San Diego, of his parents' house, of pristine suburban residences all reassuringly alike in having sprinklers on their green lawns and beige-and-cream station wagons parked outside their open garage doors. For there is something cosy, unexpectedly conducive to nostalgia, about a fire engine.

They passed the Cinémathèque, on the far side of the gardens, without according it a glance.

It was midnight when, bedraggled, soaked to the skin, blinded by beads of rain that caused their eyelashes to glisten and smart, they let themselves into the empty flat, tossed their clothes off and left them in a sopping wet mound on the chequered linoleum flooring of the hallway. Ten minutes later, they had, all three of them, subsided into the same boiling bath, winkling out with their toes the tenderest, sorest, most ticklish crevices of each other's bodies, convulsed by fits of innocent laughter.

*

'Que reste-t-il de nos amours?
Que reste-t-il de ces bons jours?
Une photo, vieille photo
De ma jeunesse.

'Que reste-t-il des billets-doux,
Des mois d'avril, des rendezvous?
Un souvenir qui me poursuit . . .
. . . qui me poursuit . . .
. . . qui me poursuit . . .
. . . qui me poursuit . . .'

Like a nervous child stumbling over a multisyllabic word in a recitation, the record, frayed from over-use, would invariably catch the needle of the phonograph on the same groove. It made listening to it an excruciating business. Yet, after a few vague experiments with other Trenet tunes, or else with popular classics, Sibelius's 'Valse triste', 'The Rustle of Spring', they all somehow felt an urge to return to the number with which the game had originated. And, in the end, the repetition that had once grated so insufferably on their ears grew to be second nature to them.

Love, like the common cold, is incurable, but one has heard of few people dying of either.

All too soon, with the joyous return, the renewed self-exile from the outside world, the communal bathtub full to the brim with laughter and clouds of steam, the Trenet record, the entwined nights, the unwound clocks, the veiled curtains, the teasing and the banter, the dewy and mildewy glamour of a swimming-pool in whose heady, stagnant atmosphere the flat was bathed, the pattern of their existence began once more to assume the slightly lopsided disposition that had troubled Guillaume and prompted him to propose the ill-starred interlude at La Folletière.

Matthew loved Danielle, he remained spellbound by her – bound to her, as well, by gratitude for having released him from himself, for having enabled him to expand, to spread his wings where before he had lived earthbound, beached, impotent, his wings as useless as those of a gull trapped in an oil slick, his soul as freakishly cramped and pinched and shrivelled up inside his body as his penis had felt inside the cup of his underpants, his consciousness of self

nightmare-stricken by a deep and persistent feeling of contraction, of compression, of emotional and corporeal insufficiency.

Danielle loved him, but with a love in which physical passion was tempered by the kind of tenderly protective affection for smallness in whatever manifestation – for a kind of tragic cuteness, as though it were Cupid himself one had been seduced by – that must be instinctive to every human being. For her, the pleasure of making love to Matthew derived above all from the opportunity it gave her to be privy to the pleasure he took in her. She never ceased to wonder at the force with which his head would be thrown backwards, his distended pupils would float upside-down to the tops of his eyes and his crimped, almondy brown little member would all of a sudden sprout into its manhood and furiously cast forth its white sap – and this simply by being talked to, like a house-plant. It was a little like making love to a figure out of Picasso's Rose Period, one of those frail, wistful bareback riders who do not remember being painted.

Both of them loved Guillaume; yet, in spite of their love, he could not help seeing himself as the odd man out.

Ever since the intrusion of Matthew, who had entered their lives as one enters a film halfway through, learning the rules, painfully learning his lines, Guillaume had watched him arrogate to himself a more and more prominent place in the flat.

At first, Matthew had been hardly more than a pet to them, a tame cocker spaniel wagging its tail at the merest sign of affection, a toy, an amusing new acquisition to divert them from their airless and stifling intimacy. Now, with his ascendancy, Guillaume was beginning to fancy, rightly or not, that he himself had become more his sister's lover than her twin and that he would henceforth be visited upon by those anxieties of the lover to which the twin is happily immune: the pangs of jealousy and resentment, the hellish torment of sleepless nights spent mulling over what some equivocally worded remark had intended to convey. The knot that bound them together had been fatally slackened to encompass Matthew.

If, as they had once whimsically fantasised about one another, he and Danielle were mythical, prototypical lovers, Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, what were they becoming? A mismatched couple; or, Tristan and Juliet.

It was now Guillaume who, night after night, would return from padding to the bathroom, as Matthew had done, silently pause on

the threshold of the bedroom and – looking, with his alarmingly intense eyes and his tousled mop of hair, like a transvestite whose wig has just been snatched off – gaze with appalled fascination at the two naked, intermingled bodies and, beside them, the crude imprint of his own body on the warm, creased sheet and of his own head on the pillow, as though he were seeing his own ghost.

These two images – that of Matthew and Danielle curled up naked in each other's arms, that of Guillaume motionless in the doorway, his own nakedness rendered luminous, nearly transparent, by the light from the corridor, his left hand loosely dangling on to his crotch, his right clasping the light switch between his thumb and his forefinger as daintily as Mlle. Gabrielle d'Estrées tweaking her sister's nipple in the curious double portrait from the École de Fontainebleau – these two images might have been the two outer panels of a triptych whose central partition would be the heart-rending void that separates individuals in a world all too ready to lend itself to unimaginable confusion and misunderstanding.

Though these were becoming increasingly isolated, there were still spasms of lucidity, when it would occur to one or other of them, in an almost subliminal fashion, that the hour of their reckoning was imminent, that the world at large, which had indulged them up till now, which had given them their heads, must eventually call them to account. Yet, strange as it seemed (though, truth to tell, they paid scant attention even to this strangeness), that hour had for some reason been indefinitely postponed. No telephone call had come from the Var to announce their parents' impending return, which would in its turn have entailed a painful session regarding their behaviour at the wedding of cousin Jacquemette, nor had they been contacted by either their grandmother or their aunt at *Le Nègre Bleu*.

In fact, the telephone had stopped ringing altogether; and once, when Guillaume picked up the receiver with the half-formulated project of calling the house in the Var in an endeavour to forestall the inevitable, he was puzzled to find it quite dead, without a dialling tone.

His puzzlement lasted just long enough for him to wonder if he ought to inform the others. Then, on the perfectly reasonable assumption that the telephone had been cut off because its bill had been left unpaid by their parents' extended absence, he thought no more about it.

*

Ever since the night of their homecoming, when their drenched clothing had been shed on to the hallway floor, they had turned the heating up full blast and walked through the flat in the nude.

Yet they were never totally naked. By some communally assumed fetishism each would tend to wear a single item of clothing, which might be: for Guillaume, a white sheet edged by a pale blue stripe negligently draped over his shoulders like a toga; for Danielle, a pair of jet black, elbow-length evening gloves that caused her in the dark to appear armless, like the Venus de Milo; and, for Matthew, a frontiersman's suede belt worn loose around his waist. In this way, lolling about the *quartier des enfants*, spontaneously adopting as in a frieze a hundred gallant poses a day, in front of the muslin, marble-green curtains of Danielle's bedroom or in the shadow cast by an Empire table lamp, they came to resemble those near-naked figures of antiquity, heroes, warriors and goddesses, depicted in the neo-classical paintings of a David, for instance, or an Ingres.

The game, if it could still be considered just a game, had been reduced to its essence. It had, to start with, lost its very name. None of them any longer felt the need to refer to it as Home Movies, or indeed by any name at all, so pervasively was it threading itself into the texture of their existence together; and the cinematic allusions with which it had all begun, and which its latest evolution had rendered redundant, were unregretfully dropped.

Only the forfeits remained, the gauntlets and the challenges and the sexual jousting, as Danielle flexed the muscles of her beautiful naked back to obtain what she hoped was the effect of a bather by Ingres and the two youths stood with penises upthrust, akin to classical statues sculpted in erection.

This was to be the last period of the game.

But it would be more than simply the intensification of what had preceded. For if the stakes rapidly escalated, it was due above all to a growing resentment on Guillaume's part towards both Matthew and Danielle, a resentment that contrived none the less, by the paradox of human nature, to cohabit with his love for them, with his craving to penetrate deeper and deeper into the shadow spots of their bodies, feeling and fingering and probing them as though they were an indivisible tissue, out of whose same epidermal skein each of them had been clothed.

Insufficient now were the playful tugs and tweaks, the giggly

cross-dressing, the *touche-pipi*, the wanton yet somehow still innocent atmosphere of goatish adolescent pranks perpetrated inside a tent or a locked upstairs bathroom or behind a playground lavatory. The props of old, the oval portrait of Gene Tierney, the black cats, even Guillaume's whip, had served their purpose and been discarded, and all that remained was the hard, bright literalness of sexual desire, the skin, the flesh, the body, deep, deep down into whose inviting orifices they would, like orphaned fox cubs, go to earth.

Intensifying the game, too, was the hunger that had gradually begun to gnaw at them, to rack their throbbing temples with fearful migraines. Now wholly without material resources, refusing to entertain the notion of reaching out to either family or friends (for which friends?), they would each in turn cast over their nudity a dirty, stringy pullover and a pair of stained jeans, tiptoe down into the courtyard and forage in the communal dustbins that were aligned along one of its walls.

But what they extracted from these, and it was little enough, had the instantaneous effect of constipating them. After a great deal of heaving and puffing, along with other, more comical sound effects, they would eventually produce stools that were hard, musky pebbles the shape of miniature rugby balls, causing Danielle to shriek in agony from behind the bathroom door that she would 'soon have to shit by caesarean section!'

And it required just such another seriocomic circumstance for the *quartier des enfants* to convert itself utterly into the Sadean caepharnum that she had once flippantly wished for it to become.

One evening, a week or so after their return, idly ransacking the pantry for some still edible scrap of food, a crumbling breadstick inside its cellophane packet or a half-unwrapped bar of mouldy Swiss chocolate, Danielle happened upon a bounty about which all three had forgotten. On the very top shelf, stored away in a corner out of the animals' reach, were four cans of cat food.

She cried out to the others. Guillaume found a can-opener and screwed open the lids with such impulsive haste that he gashed his thumb. Then, with their hands, they scooped up the moist, pungent, jelly-rimmed meat and devoured it without a thought for the future.

Unfortunately, it had on their digestive tracts precisely the contrary effect to the various odds and ends they had been rifling

from the dustbins in the courtyard. Almost at once their stomachs began to rumble, to seethe and ferment with gassy bubbles. Their faces drained of colour. Hugging their thighs close together, cupping the palms of their hands over their volcanically erupting mouths to stem the flow, the three of them made a simultaneous dash for the lavatory.

Danielle, who had the greatest presence of mind, suddenly switched direction. She made for her parents' bathroom outside the orbit of the *quartier des enfants*, immediately drawing the lock on the door to repel all boarders.

Guillaume and Matthew, remaining to fight it out, raced along the corridor to the lavatory next door to Guillaume's bedroom.

There was a confused skirmish on the threshold, confused because both of them were still struggling to prevent their bodies from turning inside-out. Yet even if it was Matthew who reached the lavatory seat first, he was instantly ousted from it by Guillaume. Flung backwards, Matthew slipped and lost his balance. He skittered across the damp linoleum floor like a balloon from which the air has been let out, his intestines aflame and giddily spinning out of control like those of a Catherine wheel. And, his own falsetto shrieks mingling with those of the now enthroned Guillaume, his flesh started to dissolve before their eyes into a raging, uncorkable torrent of mud, sperm, vomit, egg yolk, soft caramel and silver-flecked snot.

A moment later, when Danielle entered the bathroom, he was still lying there, stretched out amid the multitudinous fluids and substances that his body had discharged, like a blind man who has stumbled over his own breakfast tray and is patiently waiting for someone to pick him up.

It was Danielle who picked him up, an unaccustomedly maternal Danielle who sponged him down, poking the sponge bursting with warm water up into his vaulted crevices, into his swollen grooves and declivities, squeezing it out along the sore cleft of his buttocks.

Then, half-acquiescent, half-frightened, Matthew allowed her to cleanse him further by shaving off his pubic hair, not only around the penis but along the narrow, smouldering trail of gunpowder that ran between his legs. When it was done, neither she nor her brother could for a moment resist investigating with their fingers this smooth, shiny little gouge that was now as ticklish as an infant's.

Matthew himself laughed ecstatically, laughed like the infant he resembled more than ever. He gazed at himself in the mirror. He

began to excite himself. He rubbed himself against his reflection. He caressed it all over, but it refused to kiss him anywhere save upon his lips. A spectral tracing of these kisses stayed for a while on the misted surface of the glass, before fading away like the Cheshire Cat's grin.

Then, suddenly, without warning, Guillaume approached him and pinned him against the reflection. Wild-eyed, his nose bent sideways, his teeth scraping the glass, his left cheek flattened against his double's right cheek, Matthew started to gasp for air, so arduously, so desperately, one might have supposed his reflection to be giving him the kiss of life.

It became obvious that Guillaume meant to sodomise him.

Previously, between the two youths, a certain sense of propriety, as to when and where they might stop, how far they might go too far, had always been observed. With Danielle, for both of them, it had been quite another matter; but, from its very origins, now irrecoverable, lost for ever, their own mutual horseplay had confined itself to the petty humiliations and self-abasements that have always formed the basis of adolescent eroticism – the eroticism of playground raggings and rituals. Now with Guillaume about to sodomise Matthew, a rape that already filled the youth with a strange elation even as he knew its intention was to pain and degrade him, they had ceased to obey their own rules.

After an instant of incredulity, of bated breath, Matthew screamed out in protest. And even if, at first, thrusting himself forward between his buttocks, it seemed to Guillaume impossible that Matthew – or, indeed, any male – could actually be penetrated in this fashion, that sodomy was nothing more in reality than a monstrous fabrication, the anatomically aberrant figment of some erotomaniac reverie, one of those acts, like fist-fucking, read about but only ever half-believed in, slowly, tightly, his hard, erect member contrived to squeeze through the dank, narrow, hair-snagged passage.

Danielle stood by, silently thrilled by this bizarre new union, while Matthew, his mouth drawing a smear of warm saliva down the mirror, gradually stilled his scream into a low, agonised moan, one that could either have been of pleasure or of pain.

Prising open an eye beneath the pressure of the mirror's cold, glazed, reptilian scrutiny, he could make out a set of repellently scrunched-up features that were his but not truly his, different from his but not truly different.

*

'Que reste-t-il des billets-doux,
Des mois d'avril, des rendezvous?
Un souvenir qui me poursuit . . .
. . . qui me poursuit . . .
. . . qui me poursuit . . .
. . . qui me poursuit . . .'

Submissively, placing himself with bowed head at the mercy of those he loved and who loved him, so Matthew at last assumed, unreservedly, unconditionally, the role in which his whole life had cast him, that of the martyred angel, frail of physique and lamblike of character, to be caressed and beaten, cradled and spat upon, inspiring in those who are drawn to him and to whom he is drawn a tender-hearted desire to protect, and at one and the same time a morbid compulsion to defile, the innocent, fairy-tale delicacy of nature that is what seduced them in the first place.

The household had found its identity, the crypto-Oedipal identity it had perhaps been searching for since the morning of their parents' departure.

And like those creatures in animated cartoons who careen off the edge of an abyss and run on for several yards before shuddering to a stop, they were starting to tread air without realising it.

Theirs, Guillaume's and Danielle's, was the unspoken freedom, a freedom as terminal as it was infinite, of the masturbator whose self-appointed licence to do, inside his head, whatever he pleases with whomever he pleases and for as often as he pleases must end by eliciting fantasies ever more terrible and perverse. Only, for them, it was no longer happening inside the head. Matthew, now scarcely more than a willing figment of their imaginations, had become the externalised object of these fantasies, a sweet, bruised, wringing soreness the state of his physical being; and the nakedness in which they were henceforth permanently clothed succeeded only the more in reducing them to mere psychic categories, the Man, the Woman and the Child, as in some elemental rural melodrama by Griffith or Murnau.

Beaten as he would be, and tormented, and abased, and subjected to whatever new indignity they could devise, Matthew never for one instant ceased to remain the object of their love, their engulfing warmth, their unstinted tenderness; for, the indignity submitted to, his tormentors would almost at once order him tearfully to stop, would hug him, would kiss him all over, smother him, suffocate him

with kisses, beg his forgiveness with the humblest, the most abject of apologies; and so it would recommence.

It was in this alternating current, this light-and-shade, this hot and cold shower-bath, that Matthew would rediscover, over and over again, with an exquisite chafing of his conscience, the arousing, demeaning sensations of the avenue Hoche.

The world at large, meanwhile, the world whose average, upright citizens they shunned and were shunned by, the world that came to a halt at the flat's bolted front door as though it would no longer dare to put a foot inside, that world too, for anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear, appeared to be treading air, to be breaking up, spiralling out of control, surgically exposing the twisted, intestinal whorl of its mainsprings. How else, after all, could be explained the telephone's stillness, the sudden and violent drum roll of footfalls that would reverberate from the pavement beneath the bedroom window then just as suddenly pitter-patter into silence, the whole city traversed by ambulance or fire-engine or police-car sirens, crisscrossing one another in the night, traversed as well by what sounded like explosions, even if these were only half-audible as though heard from a very great distance or as though bombs were being detonated under glass?

And these harsh, disquieting noises, the more disquieting because somehow deadened, anaesthetised, heard as one hears things when cupping one's hands over one's ears before abruptly releasing them, all the footfalls, the sirens, the explosions, the shattered glass, the unrelenting rumble of this whole end-of-the-world pandemonium, were to serve as the accompaniment to the game's very last phase, when together, in each other's arms, gripping each other as fiercely as on a sheer precipice, Guillaume, Danielle and Matthew would descend – or rather, *ascend* – into Hell.

'. . . qui me poursuit . . .
. . . qui me poursuit . . .
. . . qui me poursuit . . .
. . . qui me poursuit . . .
. . . qui me poursuit . . .'

One day . . . it was some time later . . . it could have been weeks or days or only hours . . . the flat, viewed from the invisible fourth wall through which we are spied upon by God, was still, silent, sealed as tight as a coffin. The air was fetid. No ray of light pierced the bedroom curtains. Danielle was lying lengthwise on the bed, her

head and arms dangling upside-down over its end, her long straight hair brushing the carpet, her feet, foreshortened, those of a hanged man. Guillaume was curled up against the head of the bed in a foetal posture, a forelock of lank hair obscuring his eyes. Matthew sat cross-legged on the floor, his head hanging forward, his face and breast, like those of a Red Indian, calligraphically blazoned with crosses, crescents and looping, curling lines, traced out in excrement.

Theirs was no longer the elegant entanglement of a monogram but the ghastly, ghostly, grey-green quiescence of the Raft of the Medusa.

Nothing could detain them any longer, travellers as they were across a Lethe that was as polluted as any other river.

Whether dead or merely sleeping, they were not to be awakened by any crude, external alarms, not by the footfalls, the sirens, the explosions that were none the less approaching closer and closer, frighteningly close, a sort of public apocalypse that had no purchase on the hermetically private apocalypse in this first-floor flat near the place de l'Odéon. For there, like a dream, like a snow-drift, like an avalanche of cocaine, the dead-weight lightness of inertia and the longueurs of eternity had already blanketed each of its occupants.

The noise in the street, even so, was growing louder, louder, so loud that it became possible to hear, among the footfalls, sirens and explosions, that there were also cries, screams, cheers, dull bowling-alley thuds, screeching tyres, whistles and song.

And suddenly, like Peter Pan, the street flew in through the window. A small paving stone, hurled up violently from below, came crashing into the bedroom where the three young people lay supine. It sprayed the bed with fragments of glass from the broken window. It overturned the phonograph. It shattered the Trenet record.

They are not dead.

Through the jagged star-shaped gash in the window pane a cold and misty sun is trembling and bobbing. Noise, light and air transform the room, the noise ear-splitting, the light dazzling, the air intoxicating.

They open their eyes. They rouse themselves. Unsteadily, with limbs as heavy as mercury, with the slow-motion gait of astronauts inside an airtight chamber, they pull themselves to their feet. In slow motion, too, they advance towards the window, helping each other forward, Guillaume first, then Danielle and Matthew, arms outstretched in front of their bodies like those of allegorical figures

on a Stalinist memorial, one foot seeming to float, to skim, a few centimetres above the ground on which the other alights with a leaden, muffled tread. Now Danielle has slipped and Matthew overtaken her. He knocks over the Empire table lamp. Its bulb silently explodes into a thousand particles.

They reach the window. Drawing the curtains apart, Guillaume opens it wide. The fresh air revives him as a slap will bring a hysterical woman to her senses.

They stare down into the street. This, the full length of the narrow, meandering thoroughfare, is what they see:

To their left, where it leads into the place de l'Odéon, amid a debris of rocks, paving stones and branches lopped off trees, is a phalanx of helmeted CRS officers, advancing slowly, warily, like a Roman legion. Their black leather jackboots crunch on the rubble underneath their heels. In their black-gloved hands are truncheons and machine-guns and metal shields held up to protect their faces and interlocking as unerringly as in one of those children's puzzles that comprise sixteen little squares but only fifteen little tiles to fill them. As they cautiously shuffle to and fro, this way and that, marshalling and re-marshalling their forces according to some mysterious grand design, any gap left by one of them is immediately filled up by another and the metal shields lock into place as before.

Halfway along the street, just under the window itself, a car has been overturned. Dense smoke billows round it. Ribbed, waffle-patterned iron gratings, like the sections of an enormous Meccano set, have been ripped up from the pavement and piled on top.

Then, to their right, the church of Saint-Sulpice on the horizon, there comes surging down the street, filling it to bursting point, spilling on to its pavements, a river, a veritable tidal wave, of youthful humanity, arms linked, brows shining, fists raised in the air, and led by a very young woman, an adolescent Pasionaria, a Joan of Arc in a duffel coat, bearing aloft a vast red flag that flutters and dances in the breeze.

They are chanting as they march forward, chanting at the very tops of their voices, shamelessly playing to the gallery, which is to say, to the scores of curious, startled householders who have stepped out on to their balconies in the sunlight and who, after a moment of surprise, of hesitation, proceed for the most part to join in, so that it seems as though the street itself has at last found its voice and begun to sing, and what it sings is the most beautiful, the most moving, popular song in the world:

'DEBOUT LES DAMNÉS DE LA TERRE!
DEBOUT LES FORÇATS DE LA FAIM!
LA RAISON TONNE EN SA CRATÈRE
C'EST L'ÉRUPTION DE LA FIN!

'DU PASSÉ FAISONS TABLE RASE
FOULE ESCLAVE, DEBOUT, DEBOUT!
LE MONDE VA CHANGER DE BASE
NOUS NE SOMMES RIEN, SOYONS TOUT!

'C'EST LA LUTTE FINALE
GROUPONS-NOUS ET DEMAIN
L'INTERNATIONALE
SERA LE GENRE HUMAIN!'

THIRD PART

Paris. May, 1968

EMERGING SOMNOLENTLY FROM their incubation, they were mystified by the bizarre spectacle that met their eyes from the balcony of the flat. They were as mystified as Sarah Bernhardt who, on the way from her *hôtel particulier* to the Comédie-Française and her coachman taking an unaccustomed route, is said to have exclaimed on passing the church of the Madeleine, 'But what on earth is a Greek temple doing in the middle of Paris?'

Had any of them actually heard the low rumour, the confused Babel, that had supplemented the Trenet record as an accompaniment to the game? It is by no means certain; and even if they had, the acoustics of the flat, as well as the internal acoustics of those beehives that their bodies had become, were so acute, so powerful in themselves, that any purely external sounds would most likely have impressed them as just as natural and abstract as the background music to a film, whose derivation one never thinks to question. It merely helped set the scene.

What was their astonishment, then, to learn that this half-heeded, almost subliminal reverberation constituted the soundtrack to quite another drama, one of which they were no more than spectators, tenuously present, hardly there at all.

It was Guillaume who roused himself first from his torpor.

'I'm going down,' he said simply.

He turned away from the balcony and went into the bathroom to sprinkle his face with cold water. Matthew and Danielle accompanied him. For the moment no one uttered a word. They went about their toilet quickly, expeditiously. With his back to the others Matthew began to scrub the occult markings from his face and torso. The excrement, which had dried up and hardened like mud, flaked off into the wash basin. Then his San Diego upbringing reasserted itself. He stepped into the tub, unclipped its shower appliance and showered himself all over. Neither of the others followed his example.

As in a dream they gathered up the clothes that were still heaped on the hallway linoleum, drew on underwear, shirts, jeans, socks and shoes, and, still without a single word having been exchanged, went downstairs into the street.

It had rained all day. Now that the sun had finally come out, the whole of Paris was hanging up to dry. The pavements, the façades of the houses, the black raincoats of the CRS glimmered wetly. The overturned car was a red Citroën. Its doors had been wrenched off to serve as improvised chain mail. Its windscreen was shattered, its boot caved in. It was now lying upside-down. The crowd of youthful demonstrators who had been marching forward arm in arm to the *Internationale* were squatting behind it, in their blue jeans, their scarlet foulards and their two or three layers of pullovers.

Incongruously, a *mobylette* stood propped up against its bonnet, as though the owner had thoughtlessly parked it there before proceeding on some brief, humdrum errand.

Their hands trembling, their heads raised expectantly, the demonstrators resembled the children one sees in the Luxembourg Garden waiting for the Grand Guignol to begin. The Guignol was the CRS at the opposite end of the street with their Punch-like truncheons.

But just as it is, after all, the children who provide the real spectacle at the Guignol, so it was not the CRS but the young people, rather, spreading out around the overturned car, lurking half-hidden in doorways, behind Morris columns advertising Eric Rohmer's *La Collectionneuse* and Benjamin Christensen's *La Sorcellerie à travers les âges*, even sitting on the lower branches of the trees, who at that point commanded the attention of Guillaume, Danielle and Matthew.

The cafés had closed their doors. Chairs were piled up against them. Holding glasses of lager or cups of coffee in their hands, their clientele peered through the plate glass windows. Others continued to read their newspapers quite calmly, reading about just the kind of disturbance that was taking place in the street outside, a few steps distant, the way music lovers at the opera will consult the score by the light of a pocket lamp.

In one café a young North African, with a gap-toothed smile, a scarred right cheek and strangely swivelling eyes, clutched at a pinball machine, brutally jerking it from side to side. Another man, a native Frenchman, leaning across the bar counter and cupping his ear, chatted to the barman who, dishcloth in hand, was rinsing and drying one empty glass after the next with an easy, graceful

switching of his wrist. Behind him a coffee percolator was making a louder noise than could any explosive.

It was an instant of suspended activity, as at the filming of a battle scene when everyone, the actors, the crew, the cameraman, the extras milling about in their soldiers' uniforms, await the director's cry of *Action!*

The din, though, was appalling. In addition to the cries, the taunts, the whistles, and the loudspeaker of a CRS officer who was ordering the demonstrators to disperse, could be heard a shrill, high-pitched whine emitted by the Citroën's klaxon which had got wedged in by a large fan-shaped slice of iron grating. Yet one could detect, too, above or beyond the noise, a thin, reedy, almost inaudible strain of silence, the silence of suspense, of anticipation, the terrible rumbling silence of the circus drum roll that precedes some perilous feat of acrobatics.

During this moment of respite Guillaume, Danielle and Matthew, huddled together in the main doorway to the block of flats, saw everything as though in stereoscopic detail: the CRS with their death's head gas masks, the street with its litter of paving stones, the clouds of smoke unfurling from the Citroën's gouged-out wind-screen, the crammed cafés, the householders on their balconies with sometimes the head of a small, frightened child just visible through a gap in the balustrade, the demonstrators fanning out in every direction, the red flag still borne aloft by the teenage Pasionaria.

And the graffiti. For, all along the street, in great swathes of dripping red paint, had appeared an anthology of slogans, slogans with something of the surreal quality of those coded messages broadcast by the BBC to the French resistance during the war. Here, however, it was mouths the walls had, not ears:

LES MURS ONT LA PAROLE

*

SOUS LES PAVÉS LA PLAGE

*

IL EST INTERDIT D'INTERDIRE

*

PRENEZ VOS DÉSIRS POUR LA RÉALITÉ

*

LA SOCIÉTÉ EST UNE FLEUR CARNIVORE

*

ÉTUDIANTS OUVRIERS MÊME COMBAT

*

COURS, CAMARADE, LE VIEUX MONDE EST DERRIÈRE TOI

*

LIBÉREZ L'EXPRESSION

*

L'IMAGINATION AU POUVOIR

The director cried *Action!*

The CRS started to advance. Their truncheons were as pliant in the air as though underwater. The Roman legion no longer existed. It was every man for himself. Singly or in pairs, their gas masks investing them with a forbidding Martian otherness, they moved forward, each at his own speed, deflecting with their shields the stones, the branches, the mudguards and water bombs that pelted them from the other side of the Citroën.

At first the demonstrators succeeded briefly, randomly, in standing their ground. A few daredevils among them raised die-hard fists. They endeavoured to reprise the chorus of the *Internationale*, but it soon petered out in a desultory exchange of cries and jeers. Then, when what little ammunition they had about them was finally depleted, some of them fought a rearguard action with whatever else was at hand, while others who had already taken flight stubbed their feet on the street's fissured and treacherously irregular paving and sometimes fell down hard on their knees and ankles.

Meanwhile, making steady progress, the CRS were now hurling

tear-gas canisters in front of them. Each of these would land with the dry thud of a package through the letter box. After a moment of uncertainty, when no one knew for sure whether or not it would prove to be operative, there arose out of it a tiny cone-shaped cyclone of pungent orange smoke. It swelled to monstrous proportions. It towered over its liberator and his adversaries alike with the uncontainable energy of a genie released from a bottle.

The householders beat a speedy retreat from their balconies, slamming shutters and windows behind them. One after the other, with the laconic gesture of knights-errant snapping shut their metal visors before joining battle, the demonstrators drew foulards up over their mouths and noses.

Then they set to running, pursued by the forces of order.

A young black man was cornered by two of the CRS in the doorway of a café. His eyes closed, squeezed tight, his beautiful tapering fingers protectively splayed out over his short, crisped hair, he collapsed on to the pavement under the blows that were methodically descending on him, first from the right, then from the left, as from two little matching blacksmiths on the miniature dance floor of a music box, swinging their little hammers back and forth to the accompaniment of the Anvil Chorus from *Trovatore*.

The café in question had a plate glass door, but its lower section was obscured by advertisements for Royale cigarettes and Pernod. So, from inside, nothing could be seen but the truncheons rising and falling, regular as clockwork. Flattening their noses against the glass, those positioned nearest the door peered downwards in a vain attempt to make out who it might be on the receiving end.

When a rivulet of blood began to streak the black man's forehead and the collar of his white shirt, the CRS took to pummelling his crotch.

There was an especial poignancy to the glimpses of pink one had caught from his agitated palms and fingernails. They made him look as though he had been flayed.

Further off, a young woman in a trenchcoat, very Garbo, very photogenic, long auburn hair tucked under a floppy hat of the same material as her coat, was being pursued across the street. She reached a half-open ground-floor window, passed it, doubled back.

At first beneath the startled gaze of the elderly couple who were framed in this window, then with their active assistance, she plunged headlong over the sill into their flat.

Though the window was instantly closed and locked behind her, one of her pursuers nonchalantly smashed it in with his truncheon.

Now, their eyes streaming from the effects of the tear gas, the demonstrators were darting here and there, two steps forward, one to the side, just the move of a knight in chess, swerving to pick up a loose paving stone and hurl it backwards over their shoulders, flanking every obstacle in their path, changing tack, skidding, nearly falling, carrying the wounded out of the firing range, taunting, teasing, scampering away again; while all the time, diagonally sweeping the chessboard like caped and mitred bishops, the CRS relentlessly drove them on, down the congested street and towards the place de l'Odéon.

Guillaume, Danielle and Matthew, still innocent bystanders, still staring incredulously at this spectacle, at this contest of whose *casus belli* they remained in preposterous ignorance, were also being driven back.

At the very corner of the street where it joined the carrefour de l'Odéon, Matthew tumbled across a semi-conscious young man. His tenebrously handsome features were striped with blood like those of the Kennedy son in Danielle's photograph. He had lost control of his bowels. A dark hexagonal stain was slowly spreading around the crotch of his jeans and down the seam of his left leg.

Confronted with this derelict piece of flotsam that had been beached by the tide of humanity, Matthew found himself so unbearably moved that his eyes at once overflowed their banks. An image flashed before them, the image of the ravishing monster he had seen crossing the street in front of the National Gallery. As then, and as in his dream, he was struck now by something rather noble about this young man, with his blood-streaked face, his hair in disarray, his foulard, his spasmatically twitching eyes, even his stained jeans.

Guillaume's telephone call had awakened him prematurely from his dream. This time, however, it was no dream. He would perform the miracle. He would raise the dead.

He had been separated from Guillaume and Danielle in the crowd. Without alerting them, he knelt at the youth's feet. Mortified by his incontinence, the latter clumsily tried to screen the stain with his hand. But Matthew was practical, businesslike. Prising the youth's arm free from his crotch, he placed it around his shoulders and propped him up against the wall. The youth was as limp as a rag. Whenever Matthew stood him upright, his legs would buckle under him and he would slide to the pavement.

'You can walk,' Matthew whispered in his ear, 'you can walk if you try, if you let me bear your weight.'

He succeeded at last in maintaining him in an upright position; and with the youth's hands clasped about his neck, his feet dragging behind him on points, Matthew started hauling him out of range of the CRS.

But they were stopped almost at once by a man in his late thirties. His black leather jacket, beige cotton slacks, open-necked sports shirt and rimless, mauve-tinted dark glasses instantly identified him as a plain-clothes policeman. He had a pimply, acne-ridden skin and one imagined him badly shaved, as it were, beneath his beard.

Dangling on his shirt front was a diminutive camera. He had been photographing the faces of 'ringleaders'.

He shouldered Matthew aside so violently that the youth slithered down the wall on to the pavement like a cartoon character flattened out by a steamroller.

'What the devil are you up to?' the plain-clothes policeman spat at Matthew. 'Pisspot here is bound for the cells and unless you want to join him you'll make yourself scarce.'

'But he's hurt, can't you see? He ought to be in a hospital. He needs treatment.'

'He'll get treatment all right. At the station.'

He seized Matthew by the two lapels of his jerkin.

'You aren't French, are you? What accent do you call that?' he muttered, clamping him by his neck against the wall. 'Deutsch? English? Engleesh?' he said, stressing the adjective to make himself understood. He kicked Matthew on the ankles with the metal toecap of his shoe. 'You know, little man, you've just managed to get yourself deported.'

Matthew wriggled helplessly in his grasp. The policeman's long, nut-brown fingernails scraped the back of his neck. His breath smelt of Gauloise cigarettes.

It was then that Guillaume seemed magically to materialise in front of them. There was a small paving stone in his hand. The policeman was granted no more than a second or two to register his presence before Guillaume shoved the stone hard into his face.

The blow felled him utterly. With a groan he clutched at his nose. Blood spurted out of both nostrils at once. His mauve glasses dangled from one ear like a piece of loose bunting.

Guillaume pulled Matthew away.

Matthew glanced down at the young man on the wet pavement.

'What about him? Shouldn't we –'

'Are you mad? Do you realise what we've let ourselves in for?'

An anxious Danielle at their side, they rejoined the crowd of demonstrators, who were being swept down into the carrefour de l'Odéon as a torrent plunges into the sea.

The *carrefour* was a wasteland of devastation. The unprecedented scale of the devastation, the cars overturned, the buses set aflame, the cafés wrecked, the restaurants looted, the last of the wounded now limping away down adjoining side streets – everything brought graphically home to them that the encounter they had just witnessed had been a mere skirmish by comparison with the pitched battle of which this scene represented the aftermath.

In the middle of the square a barricade had been constructed. To build it the plane trees that had lined the boulevard Saint-Germain for hundreds of years had been chopped down in a couple of hours. The battle over, lost and won, this barricade straddled the near-deserted street, pathetic, undefended, good for nothing but a bonfire.

An old man, with a black patch over one eye, was sheltering in the entrance to the Danton cinema. Fragments of broken glass creaking like snow beneath his shoes, he stood there attempting to take it in. Tears were welling in his good eye. To no one in particular he cried, 'The scoundrels! The scoundrels! These trees were part of Paris's history. It's history that has been destroyed!' not yet understanding that it had also been made, that history, precisely, is made by chopping down trees as an omelette by breaking eggs.

Near the Métro entrance was a Morris column, on top of which, like King Kong, that Quasimodo of the Empire State Building, there squatted a pot-bellied, bearded young man wearing a pale green windcheater. After several attempts to stand up straight, when he would shakily position himself on an upright footing before dropping back on all fours, he managed at last to retain his balance. He surveyed the wreckage. One half-expected him to beat his breast in jubilation.

Whether it was by following their own instincts or else because they were engulfed by the panicky onrush of demonstrators, Guillaume, Danielle and Matthew tore along the south pavement of the

carrefour past the Danton cinema, past the *bouche du Métro*, past the Morris column, into the rue Racine.

There, the gates of the École de Médecine stood wide open, but access to the school's precincts was being vetted as rigorously as was possible under the circumstances by two youthful sentries. Its courtyard was chock-a-block with demonstrators who had taken cover there like refugees fleeing for sanctuary inside the compound of an embassy. Its grubby white walls were plastered over with mimeographed posters announcing committees and meetings and general assemblies; plastered over, too, with brash manifestos, ultimatums and stencilled, scurrilous lampoons of Grimaud, the Prefect of Police, Marcellin, the Minister of the Interior, and de Gaulle.

Borne inwards and upwards by the crush, the three friends mounted the stairs and entered the building, which, though the fact was unknown to them as yet, had been 'occupied' two days previously.

Even to those who were completely *au fait* with the situation, who might therefore have furnished an explanation for every folly, for every form of eccentricity, who might have justified every deviation from the norm – the atmosphere, the bedlam, that reigned within the École de Médecine that afternoon would have seemed wayward, unstable, fantastical.

Medical students scarcely out of their teers strolled along the corridors with surgeons' masks on their faces to shield them from a tear-gas attack.

Above the doorway to the main operating theatre some scallywag had ingeniously affixed a skull and crossbones – not a flag, but a real skull and two real bones.

In one of the school's washrooms, its walls as discoloured as rotting teeth, a blackened porcelain sink in one corner, on which converged a whole Métro plan of exposed piping caked with grime, a small oblong window in the other corner, framing the slate-grey Left Bank skyline dotted with chimney pots, four students sat together on a bench of hard birch plywood. Farthest on the right was a ruddy-complexioned young woman with carrot-coloured hair cascading over her back. She wore a white ankle-length dress whose paisley pattern resembled a swarm of tiny, squirming tropical fish. To her left, an adolescent girl, her dark hair boyishly close-cropped, her orange-striped dress fastened to two thin shoulder-straps

over her uncovered shoulders, was strumming a mandolin. Then came a young man, gentle of expression, in a white, collarless shirt and loose cream slacks, his shoes, with their socks tucked inside them in kittenish balls, set neatly side by side at his naked feet. Finally, on the extreme left, listlessly fanning herself with a simple Chinese fan made out of ribbed black paper, was a plainer and more mature woman, underneath whose almost transparent mulberry-hued blouse her bra-less breasts were lolling, this way and that, across her chest. Sprawling at her feet, half-asleep, was a child in a little blue denim boiler suit, her hair trailing the bare wooden floorboards. They were singing 'Michelle' softly and in tune.

And, most fantastical of all, in the basement of the same building, inside the school's morgue, a half-dozen naked cadavers of frozen, bone-hard flesh were laid out on gleaming trolleys.

Death sometimes knocks a man out, sometimes defeats him on points. In either event, it posthumously erects a statue to its adversary. Laid out in that cold white chamber, exposed to unflinching stares and obscene commentaries, these statues of death, these chipped and dusty plaster-casts of death, would have appeared dead even to the dead. They were riddled with death, as a dying man may be riddled with cancer. Not even Jesus could have revived them.

An interminable discussion was being conducted around the cadavers. If the school were to be besieged, should they be carried out into the courtyard and hurled over the gates at the CRS?

To be sure, there existed a sublime precedent in the Cid, whose corpse, braced up in his saddle, led the Spanish army into battle against the Moors. But no one knew what to do. No one dared to take a decision. These young iconoclasts drew the line at the dead.

An hour later, news arrived that the CRS were veering off in another direction, along the boulevard towards Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The students who happened not to be on duty that day, whose names had not been posted in the 'occupation' roster pinned up on a bulletin board in the central hallway, decided to sneak into the street and make their way home.

Afraid to inform themselves, to pose the merest question, for fear of being held up to ridicule, Guillaume, Danielle and Matthew also took this opportunity to slip away.

The absence of passers-by, of traffic, of neon, endowed the carrefour de l'Odéon with a draughty film-set vastness. On every side, along the tributaries of the square, the rue de Condé, the rue des Quatre-Vents, the rue de l'Ancienne Comédie and the rue Hautefeuille, demonstrators, in twos, threes and fours, bleeding or unhurt, were tiptoeing off the now deserted stage on which the drama had been enacted. There was, too, at the very last, one young boy, who had on a navy blue beret and a voluminous cape, the old-fashioned kind called a *macferlane*, and who momentarily interrupted his flight so that he might gather up, with the mischievous pirouette of the little periwigged blackamoor retrieving the Marschallin's handkerchief in the final scene of *Der Rosenkavalier*, a bloodied red foulard that a fellow fugitive had let fall in the gutter.

That same afternoon, by a most unexpected contrast, the place Saint-Michel had been spared. However, only one of the brasseries that overlooked the fountain had remained open for custom. As they walked in front of it, their intention being to cross the Pont Saint-Michel to the Île de la Cité then re-traverse the Seine by a bridge further south, someone inside rapped noisily on the window.

'Guillaume! Guillaume!'

It was Dauphin. In reality, his name was René; yet he had been known for as long as anyone could remember by his half royal, half piscatory alias. Prince and dolphin: with his starchy, old-world gallantry, his flapping arms and the silent laughter that would shake his tall, broad-shouldered frame, he seemed to partake of both species at once.

Dauphin was a year older than Guillaume and had formerly been his classmate, until they had lost contact with each other when he entered one of Paris's *polytéchniques* as a student of economics.

Even at school, his politics had always been conservative and capitalist. He read the *Wall Street Journal*, for which he had been obliged to place an order with a bemused newsagent, and airily alluded to 'seeing my banker' when all he meant was 'going to the bank'. But, in a world so cynical that one starts to doubt a child's smile, he was not a cynic. Guillaume was very fond of him.

They went inside.

Dauphin was standing alone at the window with a glass of lager. He was totally unrecognisable. Instead of the almost parodically sober dark suit that had become his trademark at school, he was wearing a leather bomber jacket with exotic markings and a filthy

fur-trimmed collar, a mottled pair of jeans and a plaid shirt opened wide at the neck. Even more startling was his head, which had been shaved, except for a thick topknot in the Chinese style.

For an instant Guillaume did not know how to respond, whether or not to laugh out loud. He pointed to the top of Dauphin's head.

'What is *that*?'

Dauphin caressed his baldness.

'It suits me, don't you think? But it's a long story. Let me buy you a drink.'

He kissed Danielle and was introduced to Matthew whom, not being a cinephile, he was meeting for the first time.

They asked instead for food – sandwiches, *croque-monsieurs*.

'Food? Well, I wonder,' replied Dauphin, glancing over at the bar. 'There's a bit of a shortage, after all. But I'll see what I can do.'

They could not understand what he meant by *shortage*. But there were so many things they could not understand.

He returned bearing ham sandwiches and Coca-Colas. Guillaume put the question to him again:

'So? The topknot?'

'I've been living in Mongolia.'

Dauphin visibly savoured the effect that his sensational announcement had on his friends. They did not disappoint him.

'I spent seven weeks in the Gobi Desert with a nomadic tribe.'

'But your studies? The *polytéchnique*?'

'Oh, my studies . . .'

He gazed blankly into the middle distance as though his studies belonged to some now defunct period of his life.

'Look around you, Guillaume. History, knowledge, imagination – they've taken to the streets. They're in circulation. They're no longer private property. They're no longer the private property of an élite, to be dispensed to those it considers worthy to receive them. If I learned anything at the *polytéchnique*, it was that there aren't two meanings to the word *master*. Master and student, master and servant, well, it's exactly the same thing.'

'I didn't know', Danielle curtly remarked, 'that the *Wall Street Journal* was delivered in the Gobi Desert.'

Unable to suppress a grin, Dauphin doubtless took a malicious pleasure in confining his response to the party line:

'I don't read Fascist rags.'

Guillaume and Danielle were confounded by this imposter, this false Dauphin.

'But what's happened to you?' cried Guillaume. He gaped at the

survivors of the battle, now calmly drinking beers and Cokes as though taking a break between two tutorials. 'For that matter, what's happened to everyone? To Paris? Why these barricades, why these CRS vans everywhere? What's going on, for Christ's sake?'

It was Dauphin's turn to express incredulity.

'What do you mean, what's going on? You're seriously asking that question?'

'Yes,' replied Guillaume.

'You really don't know?' Dauphin examined Guillaume's features for a trace of irony, a hint that he was being teased.

'No! No, I tell you.'

'But where have you been?'

'Where? Away . . .'

'Away? How did you get back? How did you manage to re-enter the country?'

'Look, first things first.'

Dauphin could only return Guillaume's blank stare. His lips were parted in a half-smile, his raised eyebrows were two bushy circumflexes.

Persuaded at last that, for whatever reason, a reason he could not as yet fathom, his friends knew nothing of the upheaval that had convulsed the faculty of Nanterre, then the other faculties, then the whole of Paris, before spreading out to 'the four corners of the Hexagon', as newsreaders say, he began to recount the legend of what had already come to be known as *les événements de mai*.

So it was, only then, that they learned how the expulsion of their own Henri Langlois from the Cinémathèque Française had been the Sarajevo of these *événements;* how, at the very least, it had crystallised a spirit of revolt that was already in the air, had served, in essence, to light a flame that was subsequently to be relayed from hand to hand like the Olympic torch . . .

'Is Paris burning?' Hitler screamed down the telephone at General von Choltitz in June 1944. Well, Paris was burning now. The flames of revolt were licking streets, houses, classes, hearts and minds. And, whatever else it might have brought them, this conflagration had offered Parisians a permanent open-air spectacle, a pageant, a masque, a Mystery Play. It was almost as though, each and every evening, they could consult their copies of *Pariscope* to see which events they ought not to miss.

Michel Foucault was headlining at the Maubert-Mutualité

amphitheatre, Sartre at the Sorbonne, Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renaud, sharing the stage with their own public, at the Théâtre de l'Odéon.

Queues formed early, seats were at a premium and it was often standing room only.

It was a show in which everyone might take part. There were old ladies on the seventh floor pouring basins of icy water on to the heads of the CRS then shutting their windows and drawing their curtains with a zeal that belied their age and respectability. There were irate mothers hovering on the sidelines of some demonstration or other until they had spotted their teenaged offspring: whereupon, cuffing them on the ears, they would give them a good scolding and drag them off home, deaf to the immemorial objection that their chums had been permitted to stay. And these were by no means the youngest of the militants. For, following the expulsion of a pupil from the Lycée Condorcet, the *lycéens* of Paris had elected to call their own strike. Downing their pens and little wooden pencil-boxes, they solemnly paraded through the streets of the Left Bank alongside their elder brothers and sisters. It was the Children's Crusade.

'What next?' fumed an indignant leader in *Le Figaro*. 'Are we to expect tots from the primary schools now to rise up in revolt?'

Then Dauphin mentioned a young German, Daniel Cohn-Bendit.

This Cohn-Bendit was nicknamed Dany le Rouge. He represented the street. He spoke to the streets and made himself their spokesman. He charmed the streets as Orpheus had charmed the beasts. Wherever he went the streets followed him. Wherever he chose to go, even indoors, the atmosphere became that of the street, of the open air, of argument and debate.

The street had always come timorously to a halt on the thresholds of houses. Now, with Dany leading it on, every house would open wide its doors. The street would enter. It would sit down. It would make itself at home. And the day would come, said Dauphin, when the Assemblée Générale would be besieged by all the streets of Paris and Dany would make his entrance into its halls borne shoulder high by his court of streets, his cortège of streets, radiating from him as from some human place de l'Étoile.

Dauphin, they could see, was no longer the person they had once known.

But he had been transformed in the crucible of history as a ball of wax is transformed in fire: it changes its colour, its shape, its texture and its odour, and it is because of these changes that we accept it to be wax. For if they did not occur, we should say, *But this isn't wax.*

It was therefore still the Dauphin of old, just as candid, just as ardent, as ever: only the subject of his candour, the object of his ardour, had changed.

'But, Dauphin,' said Guillaume, 'this isn't the first strike in the university. One gets used to them.'

'You haven't seen anything today! It's no longer just students, no longer just the university. Or even Paris. It's the whole of France that's on strike. The phone doesn't work, the banks have closed, there's no postal system, practically no petrol left. It's a general strike now, you understand, students and workers united, a common front against a common enemy!'

They felt as though they were about to founder. The country had been turned inside-out. They had had no intimation of it. And they understood at last why no telephone call had ever come from the Var, why the poet and his wife had not yet returned, why their aunt from *Le Nègre Bleu* had ceased to trouble herself with their well-being, why they had been allowed to live for so long in such a misrule of isolation and disorder.

The café had become overcrowded. They decided to leave. They found themselves again on the place Saint-Michel. Slantingly, because of a gale that caused their bodies to bow low like those of circus clowns on weighted shoes, the rain drummed on the pavements.

'It seems to me you're ripe for re-education,' said Dauphin. He added mysteriously, 'Come to Maspéro with me.'

Danielle borrowed a cigarette from him.

'Who or what is Maspéro?' she asked as, cupping her two hands against the flame, she attempted to light it in the wind.

Dauphin looked at her in astonishment. 'You *are* Martians, you three. Come with me, I'll show you.'

It was, as it happened, a bookshop, situated just a few yards away, around the corner from the cafe, in the rue Saint-Sévérin. Maspéro

was the proprietor's name. Over the shop's front door one read: *La Joie de Lire*.

Inside, its walls had been plastered with as many manifestos as those of the École de Médecine, along with stencilled slogans that ricocheted off each other and posters whose motifs were upraised fists clutching bombs or roses, chains snapping in two and rows upon rows of soot-black factory smokestacks.

In pride of place were three silk-screen portraits: of Che Guevara, Mao Tse-tung and Ho Chi Minh.

With his symmetrical, oddly vacant features, which seemed to do nothing more than fill the blank spaces between his jet-black curly hair, his black beret, his thick black eyebrows and his even thicker black beard, the first of these recalled a Rorschach blot; the second had the shiny, blandly enigmatic countenance of a eunuch; the third, displaying a mandarin's hollow cheekbones and wispy goatee, suggested one of those quaint figures that, if inverted, would reveal another, slightly less convincing face, as in a Rex Whistler caricature.

La Joie de Lire was evidently used by its customers as a library rather than as a shop. Its well-thumbed, on occasion dog-eared, stock, strewn across the half-dozen table tops or shoved upright, any old how, into white wooden bookshelves, was slowly being consumed by the same young people who had been demonstrating in the streets an hour or so before and who were now leaning against its walls or sitting cross-legged on its uncarpeted floor, none of them apparently contemplating making a purchase. Even the salesman, his chair tipped back as far as it could go without toppling over, his feet stretched lazily across the counter, was imperturbably reading the works of Rosa Luxemburg.

In one corner stood a group of young Latin American students. They could be recognised as Latin American by the sultry maestria with which they affected to wear their berets *à la* Che, their hobnailed boots with leggings as complicated to lace up as sailors' knots and their revolutionaries' granny glasses. Nothing could have been more absurdly conspicuous than their green-and-beige camouflage fatigues.

Visibly, they despised those they regarded as dilettantes, as armchair guerrillas. They smoked minute cigarillos that hung wet and skewed from their lips, gave off a peppery aroma and had to be relighted after every puff. Sporting Zapata moustaches as false as

those scrawled by children on advertising hoardings, they thought of themselves, not quite legitimately, as political exiles.

Followed by the others, Dauphin began picking up books off one of the tables as mechanically as though he were buying staple foods in a supermarket: *The Communist Manifesto*, first; then texts by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Bakunin, Gramsci and Althusser; and theoretical essays by Brecht.

These were hard, ferocious little objects. Their lurid black-and-red covers made one think of tiny revolutionary tracts. They would have perturbed the patrician serenity of the white Gallimard volumes with their fine red borders that all but monopolised the poet's library. He would have rejected such cheap paperbacks with the scorn of the art collector for reproductions. He would have shuddered with horror at the footnotes that crept up from the bottom of each page like mercury in a thermometer.

'Read these,' said Dauphin. 'All of them. Maybe then you'll understand how and why the world is about to change.'

'Where,' asked Danielle, turning the books over in her hand, 'where is *Das Kapital*? Oughtn't we to be cutting our teeth on *Das Kapital*?'

'*Capital*' (for Dauphin, an initiate, the work already existed in his own language) 'is the Bible. One of the greatest texts ever committed to print. But it's much, much too difficult to start with. You'll first have to earn the right to read it.'

'But, Dauphin, how in heaven's name are we to pay for these? We're utterly broke, or haven't you noticed?'

'I know the fellow at the counter. Simply take them. Everyone does. Pay for them when you can.'

Leaving the bookshop, their eyes still stinging from the tear gas, they started to stroll along the boulevard Saint-Michel. Over the cross-roads of the two boulevards, Saint-Michel and Saint-Germain, a pall of sulphurous, ash-grey smoke hovered as though uncertain in which direction to drift.

They talked. More precisely, it was Dauphin who talked, while Danielle, in her element, would pounce on every inconsistency in his argument, and Guillaume contented himself with an occasional dry observation. Matthew, perhaps fallen shy again, stepped a pace or two behind the others.

Were it to be transcribed in detail, with all its shrill protestations of changing the world and its naïve faith in the imminent insurrection

of the masses, Dauphin's discourse would no doubt sound banal and clichéd.

Yet, at the same time, it was not banal, because to speak so of changing the world is, in itself, a means by which it may be changed; by which, at least, are changed those who speak of it. And so, slowly, gradually, without truly being aware of what was happening to them – and even if they would only ever belong to that aristocratic race of revolutionaries more fascinated by the decline, the delicious deliquescence, of the old and moribund world than aroused by the problematic genesis of the new – Guillaume and his sister found themselves once more in thrall to a cause, a charm, to an exciting new drug. For the born addicts that they were these terms had become almost synonymous.

As for Matthew, his eyes, like those of the Madonna of the avenue Hoche, were open but appeared closed, too closed in any event for a sounding of their depths to be taken.

Their conversation, echoing a hundred others heard during the month of May, brought them as far as the Drugstore in Saint-Germain-des-Prés. It was exactly half past four.

The Drugstore, at that hour, presented a shimmering oasis of warmth and light on the boulevard.

'Let's go in,' suggested Danielle. And to Dauphin:

'Would you lend me money to buy cigarettes?'

The Drugstore was bounded, along the boulevard Saint-Germain, by, on one side, a chemist's shop, its presence signalled by a sickly green, neon-lit cross; on the other, where it adjoined the Brasserie Lipp, by a tobacconist's, outside which was suspended a little inverted red fire-extinguisher. Between them, and past a glass-enclosed terrace where young waiters in tartan blazers served banana splits and Pêche Melbas, male prostitutes, furtively or blatantly, dressed in the latest fashion of the oldest profession, patrolled their beat.

They crossed the empty boulevard.

While Danielle went to buy her cigarettes, Guillaume, Dauphin and Matthew entered that area of the Drugstore that was reserved for the sale of newspapers and magazines. Its clientele, as at Maspéro, leafed through these as idly as in a dentist's waiting-room.

To their left, stairs led up to a restaurant. Its tables were laid out around a small, circular gallery overlooking the ground floor. Its walls were furbished with enormous pairs of lips sculpted in bronze,

of Bardot, Deneuve, Elsa Martinelli. Further left, another staircase led to a second and almost identical restaurant. And, beyond, a third flight of stairs descended to a basement shop that sold toys and books and expensive gadgets designed to soothe the jangled nerves of busy executives: a row of steel balls suspended from a pulley that clicked pleasantly, one against the other, if set in motion; a rectangular glass casing mounted on a hydraulic frame and filled halfway up with mercury, inside which, when a switch had been pulled, Hokusai's wave would be animated before one's eyes.

Even if the view from the enclosed terrace was at present obscured by a fleet of CRS vans positioned along the boulevard, even if, unseen, on the pavement opposite, in front of the Deux-Magots and the Flore, blowing into their cupped hands and flapping their arms against their sides to keep warm, a squadron of caped CRS officers were standing idly around, the Drugstore's clients continued to eat their hamburgers, their salades niçoises, their osso buccos and their Pêche Melbas as though nothing were amiss, as though it were any other month of May but this one.

The men wore Italian jackets gashed by deep vents in the back and open-necked shirts with frilled cuffs and long, broad, pointed collars folded and turned down flat over their jacket collars and lapels. Whenever one of them stood up, a little gold crucifix or a medallion on a chain would catch the light.

The women's bracelets, charms, bangles, wrist-watches, necklets and earrings made the Drugstore resonate with the soft tinkling of cowbells in the Alps.

Dauphin studied them all with the same attentive loathing that Guillaume and Danielle had had for the guests at Jacquemette's wedding. He already envisaged them facing a revolutionary firing squad, the gold medallions ripped from their necks, the cowbells silenced for ever.

'These are the *petits-fascistes*,' he muttered; '*petits-fascistes*, as you say *petits-bourgeois*. Fit for nothing but the dustbins of history.'

Danielle rejoined them almost immediately. In the street Guillaume asked Dauphin to put them up for the night.

Half-fearfully, without articulating the unease they felt, they knew that they could not countenance returning so soon to the flat near the place de l'Odéon. It struck them as belonging to another planet, another universe, as though it had been sealed off from the outside world the way the room in which a *crime passionnel* has been

committed is sealed off by orders of the police; except that, now, since that morning, since they had awakened to find themselves poised on the balcony of the flat like sleepwalkers on the brink of a precipice, they were becomir.g a part of the world they had once so sedulously locked out.

If Dauphin was surprised by the request, he showed no sign of being so. He agreed without posing either questions or conditions. But, he told them, he was going home only to shower and change his clothes. He would have to be at the place Denfert-Rochereau at six o'clock.

For this was the day on which the faculty of Nanterre had been reopened. Its students had decided that such a victory, no matter how illusory it might eventually prove to be, should be celebrated with a demonstration covering Paris in its entirety. That day's exchange of fire had been simply one of the preliminary bouts.

The plan had been to march to the ORTF television studios to denounce its reporting of the insurrection, then onwards to the Palais de Justice in silent protest against the parody of law and order that had left scores of their fellows in prison cells.

The Prefect of Police had at once taken the step of confining all further demonstrations to the ghetto of the Latin Quarter. If by this stratagem, however, he hoped to have removed the sting from their protest he could not have been more mistaken.

His injunction was interpreted as an appointment. It was this appointment that Dauphin intended to keep at Denfert-Rochereau.

He lived close to the Eiffel Tower, in a third-floor, two-roomed flat that he rented cheaply because, being in the deep well of a courtyard, it was as sombre as a basement. Guillaume had once before dossed down in the large, sparsely furnished room that adjoined Dauphin's own bedroom, a room on whose floor two or three mattresses were laid out as in a dormitory. Its two other pieces of furniture were an enlarged, framed illustration from a novel by Jules Verne of an elderly bearded man with pince-nez standing in the luxuriantly sylvan grounds of a crystal-domed observatory and pointing, for the benefit of a younger, beardless man at his side, to a crescent moon of quite unusual luminosity, with the caption: *La lune! dit le docteur;* and an aquarium of such impenetrable obscurity that its occupants (always assuming there were any, for they were wellnigh invisible) could imagine – because of the flat's general gloominess and the fact that for several weeks now Dauphin had

been too preoccupied to change the water – that they were swimming in the ocean's most turbid depths.

It was a little after five-thirty when they reached the flat. Having forgotten how hungry they still were, they raided its refrigerator. They devoured salami, some slightly rusty cheese, a bowl of radishes.

Preparing to take a shower, Dauphin glanced back at his trio of guests.

Matthew was seated in a corner of the room, his chin grazing his knees, the M of his upper lip crested with a pale marmoreal streak as though he had been drinking milk straight from a carton, his lower lip composing the sort of wavery line a child might draw to represent a gull in flight, his eyebrows two black feathers. Danielle lay flat out in the other room, on Dauphin's own unmade bed, two exactly matching forelocks framing her intense features like a little Pollock's theatre curtain. Guillaume was slumped in a great soft beanbag of a chair, and his limp, gangling frame reminded one of an Alsatian pup just before its docile, maladroit and 'adolescent' floppiness matures into the lean, wiry muscularity typical of the breed.

There was a pause. Then:

'By the way,' said Dauphin, 'where *have* you been?'

There was another pause. No one spoke. Then Danielle answered. With precisely the same gesture as the astronomer that it depicted, she pointed to the Jules Verne illustration:

'There. On the moon.'

By early evening, at about half past six, demonstrators were beginning to converge on the place Denfert-Rochereau, clambering in their thousands over the lion of Belfort.

To cries of 'Free our comrades!' they marched the length of the boulevard Arago, passing the prison of the Santé, from whose tiny windows, high overhead, inmates, probably none of them students, waved even tinier red handkerchiefs at them through the bars.

At the intersection of Saint-Michel and Saint-Germain a road block had been erected by the CRS. It denied access, on one side, to the place Saint-Michel and the bridges of the Seine; on the other, to the boulevard Saint-Germain. It forced the demonstrators to spill out into the rue Gay-Lussac and the place Edmond-Rostand, which juts from the boulevard like the nose of that dramatist's most famous hero.

In the course of the evening, the active occupation of the Latin Quarter got secretly underway. With the majority of demonstrators hemmed in by the forces of the CRS between Edmond-Rostand and Gay-Lussac, a few splinter groups and sometimes single runners were stealthily infiltrating the neighbouring streets and squares, the rue Saint-Jacques, the rue du Panthéon, the rue de l'Estrapade and the place de la Contrescarpe. The first of the barricades, too, were being erected, out of railings, gratings, paving stones, branches, passion and sweat.

In the rue de l'Estrapade an empty single-decker bus lay overturned. It had crashed across the little garden on whose benches mothers would sit watching their infants frolic in the sandpit. As it lay there, its four wheels in the air like the rigid paws of a dead beast, one could marvel, as with a felled tree, at what a prodigiously large object a bus is, when viewed from an angle other than that from which one is used to seeing it.

By ten o'clock an intricate system of defences, a complex labyrinth of barricades, stretched from the place Edmond-Rostand on the north, from the rue d'Escarpes on the east, the intersection of the rue d'Ulm and the rue Gay-Lussac on the south and the Lycée Saint-Louis on the west.

These barricades, unfortunately, that on the maps of their architects could have been mistaken for bridges, were exactly the contrary of bridges. Disposed after the model of a ship's bulkheads, so that if one of them were to cave in, the others would succeed in limiting the damage, their effect, on dry land, was merely to frustrate the least possibility of flight.

Moreover, they would also have to serve as arsenals. Possessing no more sophisticated weapons of attack than the gratings and paving stones that equally constituted their sole means of defence, the demonstrators would, were the onslaught to come, have to rob Peter to pay Paul.

On television, at a quarter past eleven, the Prefect of Police, a bouquet of microphones thrust into his face, was to be seen patiently explaining that he himself had once been a student, that in his youth he too had received blows from police truncheons, that he could therefore understand and even sympathise with the students' motives, but that there was a limit, after all, and when all was said and done . . .

Then, in a direct address to the demonstrators themselves,

employing one of those euphemisms that are a hundred times grimmer than what it is they are meant to edulcorate, he stated that, if it had not been evacuated by midnight, he had been instructed by the Minister of the Interior to 'clean out the Latin Quarter'.

At half past twelve the Maginot Line of barricades was just as entrenched as ever and the Minister's instruction was passed on to the CRS.

Into this ravaged landscape, paradoxically both lunar and moonlit, a landscape that, from a bird's eye view, and crisscrossed by its barricades, must have begun to assume the lineaments of a chessboard or of the chequerboard tablecloth in the dining-room of the first-floor flat near the place de l'Odéon – there came Guillaume, Danielle and Matthew.

From Dauphin's flat (he had left home a full two hours before) they had strolled along the quays of the Left Bank, the quai d'Orsay, the quai Voltaire, the quai de Conti, until they had arrived at the rue Saint-Jacques.

The tear gas could already be smelt through the nose, through the eyes, the very pores of their skin. The streets were saturated with it. Behind its gauze veil the façades of the houses were trembling, as in the desert. The street lights had acquired mauve haloes. The pale, cloudy moon resembled the title of a film by Mizoguchi.

In silence, they stood for a few minutes at the foot of the rue Saint-Jacques. It reared up before them. It had been forsaken by traffic and pedestrians. The façades of its houses, bourgeois, shuttered, incurious, had all at once become as new, as anonymous, as unfamiliar to them as those of a city, a Munich or a Barcelona, to which they were paying a visit for the first time.

Just then, emerging from the Métro station on the place Saint-Michel, there approached a dimly illuminated band of street musicians: the Moroccan violinist from the Rhumerie, the old crone from the Flore with her creased grin and her squeezebox, the Jew's harpist, his sightless eyes like two small fried eggs served sunny side up, another violinist, probably a student from some Conservatoire, her hair drawn back tight in a braided pigtail, a gypsy with a zither, a blond, slovenly American youth with a guitar, and a tall black African whose fingers were beating out an incessant, irritated tattoo on a pair of bongo drums that he wore attached to one knee.

What made the sight of them so unexpected was that no one could remember ever having seen them together before. Because

the streets and squares where they usually performed were out of bounds to them that evening, they had assembled on the square, underneath the stars, in the shadow of Notre-Dame, to play, and for their own pleasure alone, 'Vilja' from *The Merry Widow*.

And it was, to that strange and jangling accompaniment, that Guillaume, Danielle and Matthew would finally catch up with history; that each of the phases in their relationship, the sessions of Home Movies, the *quartier des enfants*, the Charles Trenet record, the Ouija board, the nightingale, would recede from the present tense as milestones recede along a highway; and that, like an escalator, the rue Saint-Jacques would bear them upwards to their rendezvous, a rendezvous beneath the moon as lovers make rendezvous beneath station clocks.

Advancing towards the battle, they saw, ahead of them, oddly vertical in aspect, like some unscalable blood-soaked wall towering in the distance, a reddened sky traversed by tremendous grey Zeppelin-heavy clouds of smoke. And each time a pink or white flare shot up and fell back to the earth with a spill of cascading sparks and a loud, whining sound, like a firework, like a shooting star, it would briefly spotlight, as though for their sake alone, some act of individual courage and self-sacrifice. A young girl might be seen, for instance, beating with her bare fists the chest of a CRS officer who had just smashed the knuckles of her male companion; a middle-aged householder, still in his cardigan and slippers, would rush down into the street to help a group of demonstrators overturn his own car.

They continued on their way.

Somehow, miraculously, darting from the left pavement to the right and back again, ducking inside empty, unoccupied doorways, sprinting through streets and squares, Guillaume forging ahead, Danielle and Matthew trying to keep pace with him – as, all so terribly long ago, they had sprinted through the corridors and salons of the Louvre, as though that race, indeed, had been merely a rehearsal for this one – they contrived to reach the barricade in the place Edmond-Rostand, where, under the green neon cross of another chemist's shop, they flattened themselves against a stained and ragged mattress propped up on wooden crates and out of which wisps of yellowish-white wool protruded like tufts of white hair from inside an old man's ear.

As they lay crouching there, a trellis of shadow-work cross-

hatched their faces, and rimmed the smokily hazel infuscation of their eyes with deep underscorings.

The light from the torches of the CRS spattered the walls, the barricade, the faces behind the barricade, with stars, haloes, snow blots. Here and there, an image, a fragment of an image, some mere detail, privileged quite at random, stood out . . . a mouth agape in horror, a crudely bandaged forearm, a furtively exchanged kiss, a finger pointing . . . but why? but at what? at whom? Sounds were heard, screams, a grating laugh, a cadenced cry of 'CRS – SS! CRS – SS!' or else of 'De Gaulle Ass-ass-in! De Gaulle Ass-ass-in!' . . . but heard as though slightly out of synchronisation, as though incompetently dubbed on to a film's soundtrack.

Like this hours passed, or seemed to be passing.

Fully three, four, five times the CRS attempted to breach the lines; then three, four and five times they were driven back. Tear gas canisters winged over the barricade and red linen visors were drawn up. Householders opened windows high above the demonstrators' heads. They threw handkerchiefs, towels, rags down for their protection. They fetched basins and jugs, filled them with water and returned again and again to their balconies to pour the contents into the streets – for ice-cold water attenuates the effects of tear gas.

To the left, where the rue Médicis inclined towards the place de l'Odéon, a lone student was being subjected to interrogation by a CRS officer. She could be seen, by the street light that cast a halo at her feet, to be a young black woman. Her back to the railings of the Luxembourg Garden, she was hemmed in by her interrogator, who shoved her repeatedly against the vertical iron bars. A few yards away a CRS van was parked. A group of three more officers stood beside it. Whenever the young woman's head struck on the railings, these three would count in chorus: '*. . . et trois . . . et quatre . . . et cinq . . . et six . . .*'

At last, incensed, provoked beyond forbearance, turning upon her tormentor, she pulled off one of a pair of suede gloves and with her long, lacquered fingernails engraved four perfectly parallel scratches down his cheek, scratches so violent and profound they could be heard, nearly, from the barricade on the opposite side of the square.

The CRS officer squealed in pain. Very gingerly, he drew a

finger along the scratches and inspected the beadlet of blood on its tip. Bellowing *'Salope! Salope!'* at the young woman, he viciously jabbed her in the abdomen with his machine-gun. She staggered, screamed, a long, unbroken scream; then, whimpering like a tortured animal, she lurched forward on to the pavement, one leg in its net stocking upswung at a freakish angle atop the other, like those of a cat performing its toilet.

Without a word, oblivious of the rockets and the flares and the tear-gas canisters overhead, Guillaume arose, circumnavigated the barricade and directed his course to the scene. The CRS officer brusquely turned his head. Guillaume thrust his knee hard into the man's crotch, hard enough for him to feel it jellifying under his kneecap.

The officer's face decomposed into a piece of crumpled grey paper.

Fatally, Guillaume hesitated. He could not decide what to do next. He ought to have run the gauntlet of the rue Médicis or else sought refuge inside one of the houses behind him or even clambered over the railings into the Luxembourg Garden to make his escape by its south gates. Instead, he stood rigid, paralysed, the living embodiment of the paradox of Zeno; almost as though waiting, expecting, to be apprehended by the three CRS men standing a few yards away.

Whistles rang out. A moment after, they had him prostrate, in a foetal position, his shoulders arched, his palms swallow-cupped on his crotch, while truncheon blows hammered his body.

From behind the barricade Danielle screamed. She clutched her face in her two hands. No longer caring to what hazards she would expose herself, no longer knowing exactly what she was about, like an avenging spirit, a Bacchante, she picked her way along the top of the barricade, stumbled, fell, grazed her knees, her ankles, the backs of her hands, slithered down the other side and ran to her brother's aid.

Matthew was alone. Petrified, statufied, his heart pressed on the accelerator, tore ahead, out of his control.

He struggled to collect his wits. A diversion, he said to himself . . . his friends were being hurt, were being beaten . . . what was needed was a diversion.

He looked frantically through the enveloping shades, searching for some sign, a weapon, a prop of some kind.

Suddenly he noticed, on the very ridge of the barricade, that a red flag, planted upright between two oblong slices of iron grating, had

been knocked over by Danielle. It now lay flat across the gratings and the paving stones.

He remembered the duffel-coated Pasionaria beneath the balcony of the flat near the place de l'Odéon. So much else did he remember besides . . .

These memories gave him courage.

He would raise the flag once more, he would rally the side, boost its morale, create a diversion so that Guillaume and Danielle might flee to safety.

Together, they would transform this labyrinth of barricades into an Ariadne's thread that would deliver them from the labyrinth of their own bodies . . . they would lose themselves in the massed bodies of the demonstrators as they had lost themselves in their own . . . they would be swallowed up by these bodies which would become a single body, as Guillaume and Danielle had once been a single body, as afterwards, with him, too, they had become a single body . . .

His heart was pounding.

The red flag lay inert, unattended, aslant the barricade.

He looked hard at it. Then, as though he were Edith Piaf borne upwards to Heaven on the Montmartre funicular, as though the word *Fin* were advancing towards him like a train emerging out of a tunnel at breakneck speed, as though he were incapable even now of understanding the distinction that existed between life and the cinema, the Hunt and the Hunt Ball, yet remained obscurely alert, none the less, to the sublime absurdity, the impossibly dated grandeur, of the pose he was about to strike, he scaled the barricade without the slightest endeavour to conceal himself, lifted up the flag, raised it high in the air, adopted the stance of a mountaineer posing for a photograph, or of Delacroix's *Liberté*, his right leg bent at the knee, its foot firm on the summit, his left leg held back, supporting him from behind, and sang out at the very top of his voice:

'DEBOUT LES DAMNÉS DE LA TERRE!
DEBOUT –'

A shot rang out.

Still brandishing the flag, Matthew turned into his own statue.

On the far side of the barricade, a CRS officer stared in disbelief at his machine-gun. He was holding it at arm's length almost as though he had only just realised it was loaded.

He pulled off his tear-gas mask. Despite this mask there were tears in his eyes.

'I couldn't help it!' the CRS officer was crying again and again, 'I couldn't help it!'

Matthew turned aside from him. In a grotesque attempt to walk, to climb down off the barricade, crazily flinging his knees out like the ravishing monster of the National Gallery, he crumpled forward in a heap.

Guillaume and Danielle fought free of their captors, over whom the shot seemed momentarily to have cast a spell.

Shaking, they knelt at Matthew's side and cradled his head.

He opened his mouth. His tongue hung slack upon his lower lip. It was flecked with foam.

In his hideously contorted features they read the terrible truth that *one dies alive*.

He tried to speak.

But, even in death, Matthew would remember too late, much too late, what it was he had intended to say.

EPILOGUE

Paris. October, 1968

As we grow older, we have fewer reasons for hope or happiness; but fewer of those which do remain to us will turn out to be illusory.

It was a crisp, dry evening in early October. A squally wind had blown up from the Trocadéro esplanade, causing the roller-skaters' Coca-Cola bottles to spiral off as skittishly as flat pebbles over a river. On the Seine's left bank the Eiffel Tower sparkled like a neon sign, sparkled as though it knew it was Paris's logo, its copyright, its eighty-year-old trademark.

That evening the Cinémathèque Française was crowded. It was so crowded that the *rats* who had been unable to find unoccupied seats were authorised, just this once, in defiance of every fire hazard regulation, to install themselves wherever there was room, on the little flight of steps that led down into the auditorium, along the two central aisles, even stretching out on the frayed carpet directly under the looming vastness of the white screen. And those least fortunate, those who arrived altogether too late, continued to throng the foyer and the main staircase, forlornly toying with the praxinoscopes and the shadowboxes, hoping that a seat might even then be made vacant for them, that someone already seated might suddenly feel indisposed or be seized by an epileptic fit.

The Cinémathèque had reopened its doors. Thwarted by concerted protests, protests that had been amplified by the events of that spring and summer, Malraux had been obliged to revoke his decision and reinstate Langlois as its curator. He had, in a word, surrendered. The two institutions, Henri Langlois and the Cinémathèque Française, were reunited.

Langlois was standing on the stage before the crowded auditorium. He wore a new double-breasted suit, one doubtless purchased for the occasion, and a loosely knotted silk scarf. He was beaming. The whole house tipped up their seats and rose to their feet

to acknowledge the prodigal's return with a spontaneous ovation.

He made a brief, rather bashful speech, and introduced François Truffaut and Jean-Pierre Léaud, the director and star of *Baisers volés*, the film that was to be presented that evening *en avant-première*. They, in turn, were applauded. They made speeches. They stepped off the stage. The lights dimmed. The curtains parted reluctantly from their embrace.

The film's opening shot was of the avenue Albert-de-Mun and the shaded path running parallel to it into the Cinémathèque garden. Superimposed on this image, in the director's own handwriting, was a dedication:

'Baisers volés' est dédié à la Cinémathèque Française
d'Henri Langlois

François Truffaut

When the slowly panning camera ended by encompassing the Cinémathèque's padlocked grille, and the handwritten sign *Fermé* that was attached to it, an immense wave of emotion rippled through the auditorium and a salvo of applause greeted the allusion. A few members of the audience rose to their feet as before and cheered. Others wept.

Then, on the soundtrack, as the film's credit titles unrolled, could be heard the voice of Charles Trenet:

'Ce soir le vent qui frappe à ma porte
Me parle des amours mortes
Devant le feu qui s'éteint.
Ce soir c'est une chanson d'automne
Devant la maison qui frissonne
Et je pense aux jours lointains.

'Que reste-t-il de nos amours?
Que reste-t-il de ces bons jours?
Une photo, vieille photo
De ma jeunesse.

'Que reste-t-il des billets-doux,
Des mois d'avril, des rendezvous?
Un souvenir qui me poursuit . . .

Un souvenir qui me poursuit . . .
Un souvenir qui me poursuit . . .
Un souvenir qui me poursuit . . .
Un souvenir qui me poursuit . . .'

Had the needle stuck?

If it had, it was for two members of the audience only. They had reclaimed those seats at last, in the middle of the very front row, that belonged to them by right of seniority; and, as they listened to Trenet, their eyes, too, like those of their neighbours, glittered with tears.

Theirs, however, welled up from quite another source.

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Michelle Cliff

NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN

'One of the finest and most moving novels of the past year.

'In this tale of identity and nationhood Cliff evokes a Jamaica full of contradiction and complexity, a country where history and politics are played out in surroundings of overwhelming physical beauty. Slowly the Jamaican diaspora is revealed through the novel's main character, Clare Savage, whose family emigrates to the US when she is twelve . . .

'Clare's emotional and physical journey back to Jamaica and a positive identification of herself as Jamaican takes the form of a fascinating voyage through the polarities and dualities of race and sexuality, the relationships between the first and third worlds and slavery and modern patterns of emigration. Cliff powerfully evokes the historical myths and truths of Jamaican and Black Americans, and the beauty and anguish of modern Jamaica.' *City Limits*

'Michelle Cliff is a remarkable author' *Guardian*

'Vividly and passionately written' *Financial Times*

'Potent and very moving' *Sunday Times*

'Full of razors and blossoms and clarity' Toni Morrison

'A novel of great beauty' *Marxism Today*

John Barth

THE TIDEWATER TALES

Katherine Shorter Sherritt Sagamore and her husband Peter are at sea. Katherine is pregnant with twins. Peter is a published author whose stories have got shorter and shorter. Their sailing boat is called *Story*. As the lives of both approach a crisis point, Kathy proposes a double resolution. They must set sail on the waters of Chesapeake Bay, away from the cloying comforts of her parental home: and Peter must conquer his writer's block and tell her a story.

The Tidewater Tales is the story of their voyaging around the waters of the Chesapeake Bay, the sometimes hair-raising storms they encounter, and the people they meet, each of whom has a story to tell. John Barth's novel, a hugely entertaining celebration of stories and storytelling, also offers a disturbing portrait of modern America, where the waters of the Chesapeake Bay, vibrant with several centuries of American history, are overshadowed by the sinister activities of the CIA.

'One of the most widely discussed novelists in America . . . *The Tidewater Tales* is a massive, complex book' *Sunday Times*

'It sits stubbornly on the map of modern American fiction as a gigantic, and memorable, construction' Jonathan Raban, *TLS*

'Very likely . . . the most brilliant American novelist now at work' *Newsweek*

Jakov Lind

THE INVENTOR

Jakov Lind's latest novel is a tale of two Jewish brothers born in Poland and raised in England. Emmanuel Borovsky has always seen himself as an inventor; at school he claimed to have invented the air. Now in the Cayman Islands, he is seeking financial backing for his latest invention, the Redemption machine, a 'Super Computer' which will remove the decisions about the distribution of a suffering world's resources from human hands. His quest takes him to Reykjavik and Berlin, to New York and Jerusalem, and his progress is described in letters to his brother Boris, a highly successful doctor living in London with his eccentric wife, Oksana, whose love of dogs threatens to topple his marriage. As Emmanuel finds himself involved with a false Messiah, and Boris is driven to the brink of murder and insanity, their stories become increasingly interwoven and reach a fever pitch of lunatic intensity.

'A brilliant novel parodying the contemporary Jewish situation from Messianism to Nazi guilt and high finance . . . Brilliant analysis and a biting wit have combined to create sheer entertainment'
Jewish Telegraph

'Lind is a serious and important writer with a good deal to say about the horror of being alive at the fag-end of the twentieth century' *Guardian*

Robert Coover

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO GLOOMY GUS OF THE CHICAGO BEARS

This is the account of the last great run on Memorial Day, 1937, by that legendary all-American of the grid-iron and the bed, Gloomy Gus, alias Iron Butt, also known as Dick to friends and family back in Whittier, California. It is the story of the American Dream, as acted out by the Fighting Quaker ('I believe in the American dream,' he has said, 'because I have seen it come true in my own life!') and as narrated by an orphaned Russian Jew named Meyer, a part-time union organizer and WPA sculptor with a studio in an old warehouse said to have been used as a liquor depot by Bugs Moran's gang in Chicago's Old Town district.

This bawdy, iconoclastic yet celebrative work is reminiscent of Robert Coover's *A Political Fable* (*The Cat In The Hat For President*) and his epic masterpiece *The Public Burning*, and adds a new and hilarious twist to the myth of America.

'An astonishing work . . . along with Vonnegut's *Bluebeard*, this is the finest new work of fiction you are likely to find this year' *City Limits*

'An elegant, amusing and complex satire on macho myths and the politics of fame and perfect technique' *Spectator*

'A hugely entertaining novel' *TLS*

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